

## The Civilization of Colonialism

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Recently, a group of Taiwanese students visited Vietnam. At a meeting with Vietnamese students, some of the Taiwanese students commented that they believed that French colonial rule in Vietnam was beneficial to Vietnam and its people. The face of the esteemed Vietnamese professor in the room seemed to drop.

Since the end of the Second World War, about 120 colonies have become independent. The major colonial powers have expressed regrets over their past colonial history. French President Nicolas Sarkozy formally apologized in 2007 saying: "The colonial system of France was extremely unfair. It ran counter to the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity that France is building."

Yet the development of former colonies after the departure of the sovereign state changed. Some countries became failed states. As a social model that was swept into the trash of history, colonialism has for a long time become politically incorrect. However, beginning in the 1980s with its rapid development, Taiwan became one of those rare places that openly celebrated its colonial past.

Such views mainly negate the achievements of the Nationalist government in Taiwan and have become gradually more popular in Taiwan, even in the history textbooks. This contrasts sharply with South Korea, which was also a Japanese colony. Therefore, when young students in Taiwan talk about the benefits of colonial rule for Vietnam, they are reflecting this new view about Taiwan itself.

In the writings of Taiwan's pro-Japanese native groups, we often see discussion of a so-called "second movement for Taiwan's civilization." "Civilization" was a key concept for the Meiji Restoration period in Japan. It referred to the Westernization movement that led to a dramatic shift in Japan's systems and culture, making a leap into a modernized nation and allowing Japan to escape from the East Asian tributary system. The core of that system was China.

Ten years after the Meiji Restoration, Japan defeated a traditional European power, Russia. After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan saw itself as one of the world's civilized countries and completed its mission of "taking Asia out of Europe". At least in Japan's own view of its history, China or Asia represented what Japan abandoned and overcame. Therefore, the "civilized culture" promoted by local Taiwanese groups means, of course, that China did not preside and instead Taiwan became a Japanese colony. In their view, Taiwan accepted a colonial rule that was superior and more civilized than that of China, which resisted Japanese occupation. As a result, it was Taiwan that emerged from ignorance and won an opportunity for integration with Japan. Therefore, colonialism was beneficial to Taiwan. Of course, by promoting a

"second" wave of civilization, these groups refer to a second attempt by Taiwan to break away from the feudal, decadent, and backward China of today.

Interestingly, there has been a debate on colonialism recently in Western academic circles. Portland State University professor Bruce Gilley, who has long-standing ties to both Hong Kong and Taiwan, wrote a paper "The Case for Colonialism." He argues that Western colonialism has always been stigmatized, and now is the time to question this prejudice. He believes that colonialism enhances people's living standards and promotes Western (universal) values. Therefore, colonialism is both beneficial and legitimate for many areas. By contrast, anti-colonial struggles have often hindered the modernization process in many areas. This view is almost identical to that of Taiwan's pro-Japanese native groups. Indeed, it may have been shaped by his knowledge of the "Taiwan experience."

Therefore, Gilley suggests that the governments of developing countries should follow the pattern of colonial governance. Singapore is a successful case. Backward countries and regions should seek Western countries to re-establish colonial governance in certain specific sectors in order to promote the reform of poor countries.

The ebb and flow of historical debates are clearly visible in East Asia and even in the world. Japan slowed down in the 1990s, while China's reform and opening up has made significant achievements, making it possible to explore "China's rise" and the "Chinese model" as important phenomena. China, not Japan, has become a model for many countries in Asia and Africa to follow. Professor Yang Zhenning recently commented on China's development, from the perspective of population size and economic scale, and its impact on the entire world, far exceeds the Meiji Restoration of Japan in importance.

This historical rise of China is an indisputable fact. At present, China is also stepping into the center of the world political and economic stage. If China can continue to overcome the hardships and obstacles of reform, it may have the confidence to gradually resolve the imbalance between governance, the rule of law, and democracy. It may be able to fulfill the aspirations of Chinese people around the world. If so, would the native groups in Taiwan take China as a new model of the movement for civilization?

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