
China's First Panoramic Study of the History of the British Empire

Xia HONG*

School of History, Nanjing University, China

Email: roxena@163.com

Abstract:

Western academic circles have a long-standing interest in the study of the British Empire. Since the independence of the United States, many people have begun to study the history of the British Empire. It is still an important topic in the international history. After World War II, due to the disintegration of the empire, 'empire' and 'post-colonial' research has become one of the hot spots in the international academic community. The evolution of the British Empire has had a major impact on the development of British society, the development of modern world relations and political geography. How to recognize and evaluate the historical role of the British Empire is an important topic in the modern and contemporary history of the world, and it is also a topic that Chinese historians need to explore in depth. The eight-volume *The History of the British Empire* is such a set of works.

Key Words: British Empire, Modern world history, Discourse hegemony

* Author Information: Hong Xia, Professor, School of History, Nanjing University.

The term 'British empire' is familiar to the Chinese people. It was the Opium War launched by the British Empire that changed the course of Chinese history. It is precisely this British Empire that has exerted great influence on the world so far. The problems related to decolonization, such as ethnic conflicts, regional conflicts and development bottlenecks, have attracted more and more attention from scholars.

In the United Kingdom, many people began to study the history of the British Empire after the independence of the United States. After World War II, due to the disintegration of the empire, the study of 'empire' and 'post-colonialism' has become one of the hot topics in the international academic circle.

An early classic of the British academic tradition of studying the British Empire was the eight-volume *The Cambridge history of the British Empire* edited by J.H. Ross et al. (published since 1929 and published in all eight volumes by the 1950s), which systematically expounded the history of the empire in a general historical style. The first three volumes deal with the development of the whole empire, while the fourth to eighth volumes respectively describe several important regions of the empire: India, Canada, Australia and South Africa. The book argues that the British Empire was able to convert to the commonwealth because of its flexible system, which derives from the liberal spirit of the British parliamentary system. Began in 1998 published five volumes of *the Oxford history of the British empire* (editor William R. Lewis), comprehensively discusses from the Elizabethan age to the British Empire development course of the 20th century, in thematic writing ways, covering the empire's economy, the mechanism, defense, technology, science, adventure, imperial and colonial culture, involves not only the suzerain but also the colony, and it also considers the influence of the empire on the British mainland, focusing on profound rather than comprehensive. Thornton's *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies A Study in British Power*, published in 1959, is also an influential history of the empire. After tracing the formation and culmination of the empire, this book discusses the influence of the Boer war, the First World War, nationalism and democracy on the decline and fall of the empire. In addition, James Lawrence's *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, T. O. Lloyd's *The British Empire 1559-1984*, Denis Judd's *Empire The British Imperial Experience, from 1765 to the Present*, and a large number of other influential works were published.

Compared with western academic circles, Chinese studies on the history of the British Empire are very weak. There are two main characteristics of its research: first, it started early; Second, obvious lag. As early as the 1890s, Chinese newspapers began to publish translated articles introducing Britain's colonial history and its struggle for supremacy, and some books and periodicals also began to publish papers on the history of Britain's invasion of China and its colonial history. After the First World War, when the British Empire began to decline, many magazines in China began to introduce the history of the national liberation movement in the colonies. After 1949, the academic circles continued their previous research on the history of British invasion and colonization of China, and adopted the method of 'class struggle' to

analyze the relationship between colonialism and the development of capitalism. The general situation is as follows:

First of all, the study of the history of the British Empire is attached to the study of the history of the United Kingdom, while the study of the history of the British colonies is scattered among the study of national or regional history. For example, there are chapters on the history of the British Empire in Jiang Mengyin's *the History of Britain* and Wang Juefei's *the history of modern Britain*. Secondly, the works on the history of Western colonialism also make a certain investigation on the history of the British Empire. For example, the multi-volume *the History of Colonialism* published by Peking University press and *the History of Modern Western Colonialism* published by China archives press, etc. There have also been some influential thematic studies recently, such as *the collapse of the British Empire: British decolonization and the question of Hong Kong* by Zhang Shunhong, and *the study of British mandate in the Middle East* by Wang Sanyi.

In contrast, it is not difficult to find that western researchers and Chinese academics are far from the same level in terms of the depth of research and the number of results, and most of them are of a thematic nature, not involving the British Empire itself, let alone a comprehensive system. In general, Chinese academic studies on the British Empire are only a little bit, lack of systematic sorting.

It is in this context that Chinese researchers are committed to revealing the nature and characteristics of the various phases of the empire, their relationship to The Times, and the internal logic of the empire itself. Both empirical research and theoretical exploration will be carried out to explain all the important issues during the existence of the British Empire and establish Chinese interpretation model by examining the history. The publication of the eight-volume history of the British Empire is a useful work done by Chinese historians. (Qian Chengdan, ed. *The History of the British Empire*, Jiangsu people's publishing house, 2019)

The study of this work shows that the British Empire was not a homogenous process, with many variations over hundreds of years, passing through different stages, each with its own internal characteristics.

The 15th and 16th centuries were the birth of the British Empire. During this period, as an island nation, the English people had a clear connection between their life and maritime interests. The sense of national independence and national sovereignty promoted the vigorous development of British maritime activities. By the end of the Tudor period, the growing interests of the sea had become a matter of general concern to the British. It not only brought to the British people a variety of novel wealth, but also had an impact on the country's domestic and foreign policies, and made many people think and act. At the same time, the British colonial ideology has also experienced a from blind to consciously, from perceptual to rational development. The concept of 'serving the nation' entered the thinking of the English. This positive, outgoing national independence development consciousness make the British any

outsiders hinder its development, such as the Hanseatic League, Spanish, Portuguese and the Pope, as their national enemy. It can be said that the growth of the nation state is the motivation behind the emergence of the British Empire.

In the 17th century, the British Empire was born and formed. Along with the expansion of the British national consciousness, in order to realize the dream of empire, the British were committed to seeking the empire in an all-round way and achieved initial results. But that the biggest characteristic of the British colonial expansion activities in this period is privateness and folkness, the government had no clear colonial policy, the government's role is very limited, which makes the British empire building stumbled, fully behind the other colonial empires. Therefore, after the mid-17th century, with the drastic changes in the political and social structure of Britain, the British government also made major adjustments and transformations in colonial expansion and foreign strategies. The principle of mercantilism became the basic guiding ideology for Britain to create and rule colonies. In the late 17th century, Britain finally formed an imperial system based on mercantilism, which was the basis for the existence of the first empire.

In the 18th century, the mercantilist imperial system reached its peak, which sought to gain trade and wealth from colonization. Therefore, colonial rule was characterized by loose political control and strict economic restrictions. At the same time, Britain and Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France and other countries fought for control of the oceans. The war was going on from the continent to the world. All these wars were mercantilist in nature and mercantilism was the essence and root of imperial wars. This is the third stage of the empire.

However, the first world system in British history has not been permanent. In 1783, the independence of the United States brought about the collapse of the first British Empire. The British government was so shocked that King George III even thought about abdicating the throne. However, the British Empire did not disappear from the world map. On the contrary, the British Empire expanded rapidly after the Napoleonic wars. T. O. Lloyd, an expert on the history of empires, observed: Empires grow so fast, that it seems as if some powerful force, once aroused, would carry them all the way to the mountains or the sea. This, in fact, led to a paradox: why did the British Empire not fall completely under the tremendous blow of American independence? How did Britain adjust its colonial policy? How did the transition from old empire to empire come about? This is the fourth stage of the empire.

The reason is that the victory of the war made Britain occupy many overseas colonies. At the same time, with the development of the industrial revolution, Britain's economic interests have become increasingly global, and its economic development has gone beyond the scope of the empire. Therefore, during this period, Britain was no longer interested in colonizing new colonies. The visible empire would only become the financial burden of Britain, and foreign trade became the lifeline of Britain. In order to allow British industrial products to smoothly enter the colonial markets of other countries, the United Kingdom promotes free trade and broadens and deepens an invisible empire by virtue of its own trade advantages. The principle

of "trade before rule" became the foundation on which the second British empire was built and the internal motivation for its rapid rise again.

British scholars were concerned about an entirely new empire, and they opposed the old colonial system, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized by the total monopoly of the metropolitan power over the colonial economy, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. In his famous book *the wealth of nations*, Adam Smith predicted that the people of the British colonies were in every respect free to conduct their own affairs in their own way, except in the case of foreign trade. In the middle of the 19th century, Britain rose to the dominant position in Europe. The powerful national strength made British liberals advocate not to establish a formal territory empire on the issue of empire, but to link the British Empire together through trade, law, culture and other invisible forces. Thus, in the fifth stage of the British Empire, there appeared a rare but historical phenomenon that an old colonial power 'did not want to colonize'. In practice, Britain established the system of self-government in the white colonies and extended the British parliamentary system to the white colonies. In the white colonies, it established the responsible government system 'trusted by the majority' and 'the executive is responsible to the parliament'. Most of its legislation was no longer subordinate to the British parliament. At the same time, Britain paid attention to the development of local welfare in the non-white colonies and spread British culture, religion and law to the indigenous areas. The above practices enabled Britain to form a distinctive free trade empire in the middle of the 19th century.

By the mid-1870s, Britain's economic hegemony was challenged by Europe and the principle of free trade was resisted. British politicians had to reposition the relationship between Britain and the colonies. Thus, empire expansion became a rallying cry for politicians. The term 'British empire' took on a new meaning: territorially, it included Britain and all its overseas colonies. Disraeli, the leader of the conservative party, put forward that the colonies were an inseparable part of the British empire, and only when Britain and the colonies combined could they be a real empire, which could reflect the strength of the country and make it invincible in the European competition. After the 1880s, as European countries accelerated their expansion of colonies, 'neo-imperialism' became the most popular slogan in the frenzy of carving up the world. The European brand of 'freedom', 'equality', 'morality' and 'justice' was completely replaced by interests, and 'expansion' became the overwhelming force. At the same time, the British civil society 'imperial commonwealth association' is in the ascendancy, which aims to promote the union of the empire and build a 'greater Britain' by propagating the idea of building a commonwealth and promoting the union of the empire through legislative and constitutional measures. However, when the British identified with the empire, the economic development of the colonies and the formation of nationalism gradually reduced their dependence on the home country, resulting in differences in their understanding of the empire. The sixth stage of the empire's development was both its heyday and its rapid expansion.

At the turn of the century, Britain won the Boer war at great cost, but suffered a heavy moral and power blow, and its expansion stopped abruptly. In the seventh stage of the empire, British politicians tried to build a 'British empire' of small worlds in a turbulent big world and consolidate the great imperial system. However, this transformation did not succeed. In addition to the fact that the old free empire constitution of Britain could not adapt to the new changes due to the different times, there were also deep internal factors, including the concept, value and institutional structure of Britain. These factors, as well as the reasons for failure, are discussed further below.

At the end of the Second World War, the British Empire collapsed with astonishing speed. It is widely believed that the British, aware of the current situation, withdrew voluntarily and completed the 'decolonization'. However, we find that in the process of the disintegration of the British Empire, the question of which is more important, the independence of the colonies or the interests of Britain, determines the characteristics of the disintegration of the British Empire. When the British believed that their own interests were not compatible with the independence of the colonies, they insisted on the colonial rule, while the nationalists would resort to violence to seize power to drive out the British colonial rule. On the contrary, when Britain believed that the independence of the colonies was in its own interests, it would adjust its policies and eventually support the independence demands of the nationalists, and the independence of the colonies would be carried out in a peaceful transfer of power. Peace and war were subservient to the same imperial goal: the creation of a substantial 'commonwealth' to preserve Britain's status as a great power, which was the essence of so-called 'decolonization'. But the dream was shattered, and so was Britain's status as a great power: the British Empire died.

The evolution of the British Empire had a significant impact on the development of British society, international relations in modern times and the evolution of political geography. How to understand and evaluate the historical role of the British Empire is an important issue in the modern history of the world.

First, the British Empire had a great influence on the formation of the modern world. The massive population movement within the empire changed the distribution of the world's peoples, especially the formation of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries. In addition, the British were slave traders who brought about 11 million African slaves to the Americas. Most of them were sold by the British to their colonies in the Caribbean, where they became an important part of the population. Large Numbers of Indians and Chinese also went to work as coolies in the British-ruled colonies, making up the majority of the population of Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Second, the British, through their empire, spread their dominant system, their cultural system. The British used the means of government and the partition treaty to delimit the borders of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and a series of other countries, and through their imperial system, they spread the original system and cultural values of the British people. Through the expansion

of empire, English became the language of the world, and the British system of government, religion, education, town layout, cultural values, sports and entertainment became the foundation of the modern world.

Third, it promoted the political, economic and cultural development of the colonies and forced these countries into the ranks of modernization. From a colonial point of view, the British Empire was a mixed blessing. The colonies obtained advanced science and technology and investment from the United Kingdom, which promoted the economic development and the improvement of living standard, as well as the British democratic system, legal framework and international language, English. Therefore, most of the British colonies after independence chose to stay in the British Commonwealth. But there is no doubt that the colonial rule brought disaster to the colonies.

Since modern times, the colonies have been plundered but developed at the same time. The deep-rooted reasons for this can be traced back to the 'free empire' system formed by Britain. Such a system, despite all the shocks, was the basic system of the British Empire for a century and a half. Due to the development of the British industrial revolution and the spread of evangelical and humanitarian movement, is an essential feature of a free empire 'follow' the interests of the native area, and as for the colony to build a 'good government', which requires the development of education in the colonies, railroad, build factories, which earned the profits on the one hand, on the other hand also objectively promoted the development of colonial economy, for the colony formation and integration of modern nation-state. This is also Marx's classic statement about the 'duality' of British colonial rule in India: 'the British in India have to complete a dual mission, the first is the destructive mission, that is, the eradication of the old Asian society; The other is the constructive mission of laying the material foundations for western-style societies in Asia.'

The so-called destructive mission refers to the destruction of the pre-colonial capitalist social structure. The colonial rule turned these colonies into its commodity market and raw material production area, destroyed or disintegrated the natural economic foundation of the direct combination of agriculture and handicraft industry in these regions, and disintegrated the old economic structure. The constructive mission, on the other hand, refers to the fact that the British Empire carried out the capitalist transformation of the eastern society. Firstly, it means that the colonialists will transplant the big industrial facilities in the west and establish big industries and modern transportation in the colonies and semi-colonies, which objectively means that the colonial and semi-colonial countries will transform into a capitalist society. Secondly, since the establishment of colonial rule, a system of governance suited to one's own needs was needed, which inevitably required the introduction of some western models. In addition, the British vigorously promoted western education in the colonies, and cultivated many modern intellectuals who brought modern knowledge, freedom, equality, individualism and other western concepts to all areas of society, and prepared the conditions for the change of colonial knowledge and concepts.

The duality of colonial rule exposes a paradox in the theory of British free empire colonization. On the one hand, liberalism emphasizes the moral foundation of empire and follows the tradition of morality. On the other hand, the principle of freedom does not apply to uncivilized peoples, who are immature children who need to be supervised by others. British liberals in the 19th century faced a world composed of different cultures. Therefore, their views on the east were more for the purpose of constructing the cultural superiority of the west and taking the east as the reference of western culture. The so-called 'good government' is to transplant the original western system to the eastern society, because it is a reflection of the former's cultural advantages. This duality of liberalism provides the best theoretical basis for the exploitation and development of British colonies, which is the legitimacy of British colonial rule.

As for the consequences of this system, the British Empire did not expect them. In the long run, the liberal mechanism of the British Empire unconsciously created the power to break the empire and cultivate the opposite of the future for itself, which can also be regarded as a fundamental source of the decolonization movement after the Second World War. The so-called empire of freedom was born, and the empire of freedom was lost. This is a deep paradox in the long reign of the British Empire. It is the key to understand and correctly evaluate the British Empire. It is also a view from the academic standpoint of China.