

Research on Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and the Enlightenment to Frontier Development of China

Ziyu Dang

Collaborative Innovation Center for Security and Development of Western Frontier China, Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610064, China

Keywords: Frontier; Turner; Frontier Thesis; Development

Abstract: Frederick Jackson Turner is a well-known American historian and an important representative of the "Frontier Thesis" which has had a profound impact on the study of American historiography and even the world history. This paper expounds Turner's "Frontier Thesis" on its background, main contents, historical significance and influence, and expounds the enlightenment of his thesis to China's frontier development.

1. Introduction

Frederick Jackson Turner is a well-known American historian and an important representative of the "Frontier Thesis" in the United States. His academic papers on frontiers were collected in a Chinese-English bilingual book named *The Frontiers of the United States.*, which published in 2012 by China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group). This book includes four articles he wrote from 1893 to 1910: *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), *The Problem of the West* (1896), *The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History* (1900-1910), and *Social Forces in American History* (1910).

Turner's "Frontier Thesis", was put forth in a scholarly paper in 1893, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, read before the American Historical Association in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition. It broke the "Germ Theory" system and created a New thesis which caused great repercussions in the academia of the United States. Meanwhile his thesis laid the theoretical foundation for the "Frontier Thesis".

2. The Background of Turner's "Frontier Thesis"

2.1 The continuation of "Manifest Destiny"

As we all know, during the expansion of the United States in decades, the theory of "Manifest Destiny" is an important theoretical basis. It has been favored by the political and academia since the founding of the United States. As early as 1787, John Adams, one of the founding fathers of the United States, made it clear that the United States was doomed to expand to the entire northern part of the Western Hemisphere. Similarly, Jefferson, the third president of the United States, strongly supported the migration to the west. In the first half of the 19th century, the theory of "Manifest Destiny" was still prevalent in American academia. Frederic Merck wrote in his book: *It ("Manifest Destiny") means that God has pre-arranged expansion into regions that are not yet clearly defined. In the minds of some, it means to the Pacific region; in the minds of others, to expand in North America; in the minds of others, it is to expand in the western hemisphere.*" [1]

It can be said that the expansion of the United States territory was achieved under the influence of the "Manifest Destiny" and this process clearly demonstrated the characteristics of "Frontier Movement." Hence, the theory of "Manifest Destiny" provided certain content basis for Turner's "Frontier Thesis".

2.2 The profound influence of the "Westward Movement"

The Westward Movement was a movement of expanding, emigrating to the West under the support of the US government in the 19th century. Turner's "Frontier Thesis" was put forward at the

end of the 19th century when the Westward Movement basically ended. The history of the United States can only be understood by turning the sight from the Atlantic coast to the Great West. The Westward Movement has played an extremely important role here. In other words, the Westward Movement is the soil for fostering the "Frontier Thesis". As Turner wrote at the beginning of *The Significance of the Frontier in American History: up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.* [2]

2.3 The changes in domestic and foreign environment

From the perspective of the U.S. domestic environment, the United States entered a period of reconstruction after the end of the Civil War. In the last 30 years of the 19th century, the U.S. economy showed a rare high-speed development under the impetus of the second industrial revolution. The rapid increase in overall national power has strongly inspired Americans' national pride. They have begun to pay attention to their own history and historical experience. From the perspective of the international environment, the United States was faced with new opportunities, from 1890s to 1920s, turning continental expansion to overseas expansion. At this turning point, the United States was generally concerned about such a question: How does the Westward Movement guide or inspire the coming overseas expansion?

3. The Main Contents of Turner's "Frontier Thesis"

3.1 Interpretation of the Frontier

Turner believes that *the American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier—a fortified boundary line running through dense populations and the most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land.* [3] From the view of civilization, he proposes that in the process of westward expansion of the United States, *the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point of barbarism and civilization.* [4] From the perspective of American history study, Turner proposes that historical research in the United States in the past often focused on finding the roots of Germanism, while insufficient attention was paid to the United States itself. In fact, the frontier is an extremely effective line of Americanization. The initial frontier was on the Atlantic coast and it actually was the frontier of Europe. Moving westward, this frontier gradually became the frontier of the United States. To study the frontier advance, the people who grew up under these conditions, the political, economic, and social consequences it caused is to study the true American history. From the perspective of classification, Turner treats the frontier sometimes as a line, sometimes as a zone, and sometimes with a specific group of people. He also points out that the frontier is always a part of colonization. *French colonization was dominated by its trading frontier; English colonization by its farming frontier.* [5] He also proposes that we have to distinguish the frontier into the frontiers of merchants, ranchers, miners, peasants and so on. This clearly links the frontier with a specific group of people.

3.2 The Moving frontiers

The word “move” added before the term frontier focuses on the dynamic implications, and it regards the moving frontier as a process of abstract group behavior. The sociological significance of moving includes both the return to the original state on the constantly advancing frontier and the new regional development. [6]

Throughout the entire process of moving, a new social organism gradually comes into being, new forms of organization mature by degrees, and new systems settle. As the frontier moves, the evolution of the political, economic, and social systems goes from west to east. Evolution itself is used as a synonym for Americanization by Turner. Thus it can be seen that the concept of "moving frontier" reflects the motivation, process and results of the Americanized primitive civilization

3.3 The Free land

Turner makes it clear that what the West needs is free land rather than an administrative system. Turner wrote in his article: "*Obviously, the immigrant was attracted by the cheap lands of the frontier, and even the native farmers felt their influence strongly.*" [7] In this way, the need for land and the love for wilderness freedom will further advance the frontier. As Turner told readers: "*up to and including... the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line...*" [8] The frontier means vast and free land. The existence of a free land means the development of the United States.

4. Historical Significance and Influence of Turner's "Frontier Thesis"

4.1 Historical significance

In general, the significance of the frontier in American history lies in the following aspects: The frontier promotes the formation of the special American characteristics, just as he wrote in his article that *the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people.* [9] The frontier made the American nation get rid of ideological shackles from the OLD WORLD and made the American society show different characteristics. It has a strong PIONEER spirit. This PIONEER spirit is the newly formed American nation spirit which is completely different from the OLD WORLD, and also promotes the emergence of American-style democracy. Needless to say, the frontier is the birthplace of American-style democracy. Turner believes that opening up the frontier also reduces dependence on Britain in another way. The frontier creates new opportunities for the development of the U.S. economy and becomes a safety piston for social and economic development. This theory is also called the "frontier-safety piston theory."

4.2 Influence

The important contribution of Turner's "Frontier Thesis" to the study of American history lies in its foundational role in the New History. The new historiography theories and methods he applied in the study of the frontier had a profound influence on the development of the American New History in the 20th century. He initiated a new perspective of American history research and he advocated interdisciplinary research and ordinary people's life history research. Meanwhile, his research methods had a great influence on the study of American history even the world history.

More importantly, his contribution to historiography is not only shown in his own history writings, but also reflected in his cultivation and promotion of a batch of historians who use new thinking to study historiography. His broad research ideas inspired a large number of historians who continued his research. Inspired by his history ideas, they have seen many new research opportunities, which have opened up many surprising research routes. Since Turner, the study of the history of the American West has been prosperous and has become an important field for the study of American historiography. The introduction of the frontier not only initiated the study of the western American history, but also triggered the research on the frontiers of other countries in the world.

5. Enlightenment to China's Frontier Development

Although the frontier of contemporary China has its particularity, the Turner's "Frontier Thesis" still has a certain enlightening effect on contemporary China's frontier. Although different social backgrounds lead to different research propositions, the "Frontier Thesis" about regional struggles and changes in geographical location in the western America are still instructive for the study of China's frontier culture and the development of Western Frontier China.

The specific issues in the study of the frontiers of western China include the frontier ethnic and social problems, the national identity and cultural diversity of frontier ethnic groups, relations between cross-border ethnic issues and the frontier security, as well as many other problems. [11]

At the same time, there are corresponding methods for solving the problems: such as the cultural frontier, the reflection on the arrangement of the frontier management system, the cultivation of the national beliefs and the institutional beliefs of the frontier people, and the behavioral identity of social order, and achieving the peace, security and stability for all ethnic groups in frontier areas. In the final analysis, the solution to all these problems has always been inseparable from the development of Western Frontier China.

This is exactly the idea that Turner pointed out in the beginning of his article *the Problem of the West* published in 1896: *the problem of the West is nothing less than the problem of American development*. [12] The western America in the nineteenth century was the frontier of the United States and frontier issues are matters of development. For contemporary China's frontier, development is also the biggest problem. This is exactly the starting point and the ultimate goal of the study contemporary China's frontier.

References

- [1] Frederick Merck: *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History; A Re-interpretation*, New York: Harvard University Press, 1963, page24.
- [2] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page1.
- [3] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page3.
- [4] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page12.
- [5] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page10.
- [6] Zhu chengzhang, *Research on Turner's Frontier Theory and its Impact*, East China Normal University, Master Thesis, 2014, page34.
- [7] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page19.
- [8] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page1.
- [9] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page19.
- [10] Xu Li-li, *The Difference of Chinese and Western Frontier Studies; the Implications for China*, [J]. Journal of Northwest Normal University, 2015 (1) 49-54.
- [11] Frederick Jackson Turner: *The Frontiers of the United States. (Chinese-English bilingual)*, Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp. (cooperated with Penguin Group), 2012, page35.