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Cultural Aid and the Cultural Cold War: The Origins of the Ford Foundation's entry into Burma

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Abstract: ***After the beginning of the Cold War, an unprecedented consensus on the Cold War was formed in the United States. Civil organizations represented by the Ford Foundation deeply participated in the cultural Cold War led by the U.S. government through the way of identity reconstruction. In consideration of the Cold War, the Ford Foundation from the very beginning directed a large amount of funds and cultural projects to Asia, rather than to Europe and Latin America, which were traditionally close to the United States. Burma received early attention from the Ford Foundation because of its unique location. At the same time, the government of Burma was trying to maintain national unity and stability by reviving Buddhism, but was struggling with a lack of funds. So the government invited the Ford Foundation to help fund its Pali Project. While the latter agreed to provide cultural assistance to Burma, the ultimate goal was to enhance the understanding and identity of the Burmese people with Western culture, so as to better serve the US Cold War project.***

Keywords: Ford Foundation; Burma; Cultural Aid; Cultural Cold War.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, as fears of Soviet expansion grew in the United States, American officials and private organizations were simultaneously engaged in a Cold War struggle aimed at "establishing justice and peace throughout the world." The Ford Foundation believes it can play a "small but important role" as a private institution [1]. In 1950, the Ford Foundation undertook a radical reinvention of its identity and transformed itself into a major player in the cultural Cold War, with a mission to "achieve the goals of democracy" around the world [2]. The Ford Foundation worked closely with the U.S. government on overseas cultural projects and focused its attention on "Asia, which is particularly important for economic, social, and political development." [3] At the same time, the government of Burma, which had suffered a severe insurgency, had "extricated itself from the previous crisis" but was still "beset by chaos and economic collapse." [4] In the same year, the "Pali Plan" proposed by the Burmese government for the revival of Buddhism provided the opportunity for the Ford Foundation to enter Burma. However, the funding of the Pali Project was only a starting point for the Ford Foundation to enter Burma, and it never endorsed the Burma government's plan to spread Buddhism through the Pali University, but always advocated the establishment of a "center of oriental studies with philosophy and religion as the theme" [5]. The difference between the two sides in the concept of "Pali Project" essentially reflects the irreconcilable contradiction between the Burma government's cultural assistance needs and the Ford Foundation's cultural Cold War considerations.

In recent years, with the declassification of the archives of the Ford Foundation, the research on the transformation of the Ford Foundation and its overseas projects has been relatively mature. There have been special studies on the transformation of the Ford Foundation and its cultural projects in Asia. (For The studies of foreign scholars on The Ford Foundation, see Francis X. Sutton, The Ford Foundation: The Early Years, Daedalus, Vol. 116, No. 1, 1987, pp. 41-91; Kathleen D. McCarthy, From Cold War to Cultural Development: The International Cultural Activities of the Ford Foundation, 1950-1980, Daedalus, Vol. 116, No. 1, 1987, pp. 93-117; For Chinese scholars, see Zhang Yang: "Cold War Consensus — On the Educational Assistance Programs of the U.S. Government and Foundations to Asia (1953-1961)", Wuhan University Journal (Humanities Edition), 2013, No. 3, pp. 60-68) However, the context of the Ford Foundation's cultural program in Burma and the strategic considerations behind it have not received sufficient attention from the academic community. Based on the archives of the Ford Foundation and the existing research results in related fields, this paper hopes to make a preliminary discussion on this issue and further deepen the study of the Ford Foundation's participation in the Cultural Cold War.

2. THE GAITHER REPORT AND THE REBUILDING OF THE IDENTITY OF THE FORD FOUNDATION

In November 1949, under the aegis of Henry Ford II, President of the Ford Foundation, and headed by Horace Rowan Gaither, Jr., the study group submitted a written report of more than 100 pages to the Ford Foundation Board of directors, known as the Gaither Report. The report was submitted and adopted quickly.

The Gaither Report noted that "democracy in the world today is facing challenges," mainly from "communism," "totalitarianism," and war. With the "rising tide of communism in Asia and Europe," the United States had become "critical" in "strengthening the power of free people everywhere." [2] Foundation, for its part, because of its "non-partisanship" and "objectivity," enabling it to help achieve its "democratic" goals [2]. After the Gaither Report, the Ford Foundation was faced with a series of transformations and reinventing its identity.

First, the team building of the Ford Foundation was more professional. When Ford himself stepped down as president of the foundation, he hired Paul G. Hoffman, the head of the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), as its new president. In the meantime, Prominent experts and scholars such as Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, Chester C. Davis, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, and Milton Katz, a Harvard law professor, were hired as vice presidents of the foundation. As a result, the Ford Foundation has rapidly evolved from a traditional family foundation into a modern, professionally-funded philanthropic foundation.

Second, the Ford Foundation is increasingly international in its target audience. Before the transformation, the Ford Foundation's grants were mainly concentrated in Michigan; After the transformation, the Ford Foundation moved its headquarters to New York, and its funding projects expanded to the United States and even overseas. On January 29, 1951, at the Foundation's first board meeting after the transformation, Hoffman made it clear that the Ford Foundation "should support and fund activities that make a significant contribution to world peace and the establishment of a world order governed by the rule of law and justice."[6]

Finally, the transformed Ford Foundation was actively involved in the Cold War. As the Gaither Report put it, "People had to choose between two opposing paths: democracy, which strives to preserve the freedom and dignity of the individual; Or absolutism, where there is no freedom or justice to speak of and where human rights and truth are wholly subordinated to the state." [7] The Gaither Report argued against passive or defensive responses to totalitarianism or to the fear that communism brought. Instead, it advocated that the Ford Foundation "act aggressively to eliminate the causes of war and promote democracy."[8]

To sum up, the Gaither Report has a profound impact on the Ford Foundation. It not only makes the Ford Foundation go from local to national, but also from the United States to the international, and becomes the largest foundation in the United States and the world [3]. Under the guidance of the Gaither Report, the goal of the Ford Foundation is no longer limited to "treating symptoms and temporarily alleviating suffering", but to "eliminate the root causes of suffering in the world"[9].

3. ARNOLD-BROWN'S TRIP TO BURMA WITH THE FORD FOUNDATION'S ENTRY INTO BURMA

As early as before the Ford Foundation entered Burma, the official level of U.S. economic and technical assistance to Burma has been launched. On September 13, 1950, the two governments signed the first bilateral economic and technical cooperation agreement. Beginning in 1951, the Burmese government approached the United States Mission to Burma about funding its Pali Project, which aimed to revive Buddhism. The U.S. Congress, however, rejected the mission's offer on the grounds that "aid to religions, especially non-Christians, may provoke political reactions."[10]

With no hope of receiving funding from the US government for the Pali Project, the Burmese government turned to private American organizations, such as the Ford Foundation. However, several documents show that the initial contact with the Ford Foundation was not with the Burmese government, but with members of the official US mission to Burma.

On February 4, 1952, Abbot Low Moffat, the head of the U.S. economic and technical mission to Burma, sent a letter to Hoffman asking him to fund the Pali Project. In the letter, Moffat stressed the Burmese government's determination to revive Buddhism and the importance of the Pali Project. As Burma's Prime Minister U Nu put it, "the widely held belief that the Americans work only for their own material gain or that of others is one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of communist propagandists in Southeast Asia... United States' funding of this project (the "Pali Plan") will bring more benefits to the people of Burma than funding other projects " [10]. Finally, Moffat included a memo from Burma's Justice U Chan Htoon to bolster his case. In the memo, U Chan Htoon further sketched out a blueprint for Pali University and proposed building it into "a spiritual hub in Southeast Asia... radiating an irresistible light of wisdom, truth and justice "that would" dispel the dark and evil forces rooted in greed and hatred " [11]. In fact, Moffat had commissioned R. Allen Griffin, then the Special representative for the Far East of the Economic Cooperation Agency and the Mutual Security Agency (MSA), to talk to Hoffman on the phone about the project before sending his letter, and Hoffman said he had "no reason not to think about it."[10]

On Feb. 11, Edwin G. Arnold, then director of Far East programs at the Mutual Security Agency, sent a letter to Carl B. Spaeth, director of overseas programs at the Ford Foundation, suggesting that the foundation send a representative to Burma. Spaeth later wrote, "We were impressed by Arnold's rationale for including Burma in the field trip and were eager to send a representative to Burma." [10] On April 17, Mr. Arnold, who had left public office to join the Ford Foundation, sent a letter to Bernard L. Gladieux, an assistant to the foundation's president, urging the foundation to send a delegation to Burma. Since then, the foundation has held several internal meetings on the issue and decided on June 10 to include Burma as the subject of the visit. It should be noted that the Foundation agreed to send a representative to visit Burma because it prioritized Burma's special status in the US national security strategy and believed that "if the Communists conquered Burma, the rest of Southeast Asia would be surrounded, and India would be surrounded."[10]

Arnold and Dyke Brown, on behalf of the Ford Foundation, spent about two weeks visiting Burma from July 24 to August 9. On their first day in Rangoon, Arnold and Brown visited a number of Buddhist sites, including the Shwedagon Pagoda, accompanied by Lord Justice U Chan Htoon, which gave the two a sense of "the vital role that Buddhism plays not only in the religious life of the Burmese people, but also in their culture and daily life" [12]. During their stay in Burma, the two also met separately with a number of Burma dignitaries including President Ba U, Prime Minister U Nu and State Planning and Religious Affairs Minister U Win. During that time, U Nu received them at his home on two separate occasions. The close encounters gave the mission members a deep appreciation of U Nu's devotion to Buddhism. As the two men recorded in their written report, "There was a small Buddhist shrine next to [U Nu's] house, which he often entered to pray, sometimes staying there late into the night after meetings during the day."[12]

Upon their return, Arnold and Brown noted in their report that "what Burma needs most is order, stability and unity," and that the issue was not only "material" but also "concerned the minds and spirits of the people, their values and codes of conduct, and a common philosophy of life." [12] Based on this, the report recommended that the foundation fund Pali Project, which it said would "open the door to further productive partnerships between the Foundation and the government of Burma." [5] At the same time, they also noted that the grant would "promote ethnic unity in Burma, develop cultural ties among Southeast Asian countries and between Asia and the West, and demonstrate the West's interest in the ideological, spiritual and material living conditions of Asia."[5]

A short time later, Hoffman wrote to U Nu, saying, "We are seriously studying the funding of the Pali Project." [11]. In the end, the board of directors of the Ford Foundation approved funding for Pali Project. The government then invited the Ford Foundation to set up an office in Rangoon to "work with the government of Burma to orchestrate funding for government projects." [13]. On February 17, 1953, John Scott Everton, president of Kalamazoo College in Michigan, arrived in Rangoon as the Ford Foundation's first representative in Burma. This was the beginning of the Ford Foundation's cultural activities in Burma.

4. EPILOGUE: PURSUING COLD WAR STRATEGIES THROUGH CULTURAL ASSISTANCE

Shortly after the beginning of the Cold War, under the interaction and influence of the government, private organizations and the public, an unprecedented consensus of anti-communism tendency was formed in the United States, that is, the Cold War Consensus. In this process, private foundations played an indispensable intermediary role. In carrying out Cold War projects, private foundations often maintained close coordination with the U.S. government [14]. In the process of the Cold War's expansion into the ideological and cultural fields, private

foundations played a vanguard role in the Cold War, and they "even before the administrative agencies realized the importance of countering communism in the cultural and educational fields." [15]. During this period, many private foundations participated in the cultural Cold War by reshaping their identities, among which the most representative and successful one was the Ford Foundation. Under the guidance of the Gaither Report, the Ford Foundation completed its identity reconstruction, transforming from a "regional funder to a national and international funder", and its funding projects mainly focused on the cultural fields of "foreign languages, literature, art, music and philosophy"[16].

The transformed Ford Foundation did not initially focus its overseas activities primarily on Europe or Latin America, traditionally associated with the United States, but instead prioritized "key regions under Soviet pressure," particularly "poor and unstable" Asia [17]. Burma, for its part, was valued by the Ford Foundation because of its "special position" in the United States' Cold War strategy. At the same time, beset by insurgencies and ethnic divisions, the Burmese government is actively seeking to strengthen popular acceptance of the nation-state through the revival of Buddhism. The government's need to fund Buddhist programs provided an opportunity for the Ford Foundation to enter the country. However, the Ford Foundation's funding of the Pali Project is only the beginning of a cultural Cold war in Burma, with the ultimate goal of transforming Pali University into a distinctly Western "center of Oriental Studies" that provides "a platform for exchange between Eastern and Western scholars in the field of Buddhist and Eastern philosophical and cultural studies" [18]. And, in turn, enhance Burmese understanding and identification with American Western culture.

For the Ford Foundation, funding Pali Project in Burma is in line with its mission and philosophy of cultural activities abroad. First of all, Buddhist idealism is intrinsically in conflict with the materialist philosophy of Marxist political parties. The Ford Foundation wants the Burmese government to use Buddhism ideologically to curb the spread of communism, making it "a bulwark against the materialist philosophy that communism represents." [19]. Second, the ideals of goodness, equality, and peace preached in Buddhist teachings coincide with the Ford Foundation's goal of "promoting peace and mutual understanding in the world." Finally, as the religion of the majority of the people of Burma, Buddhism has played an extremely important role in shaping Burma's social culture. As Everton put it in the report, "It is impossible to understand Burma culture without understanding Buddhism" [19]. In other words, the Ford Foundation should support the Pali Project if it want to carry out effective cultural activities in Burma.

In the process of implementing cultural projects abroad, the private foundation has advantages that are not available to ordinary government organizations. On the one hand, it not only has sufficient and flexible funds, but also can effectively avoid the pressure from domestic political opinion. On the other hand, the funding of the Ford Foundation can avoid the suspicion that the United States interferes in the internal affairs of other countries to a certain extent, so as to be less interfered with the diplomatic relations between the two countries.

However, in the long run, even private organizations with less government background could not effectively help the United States achieve its Cold War goals. Take the Ford Foundation's funding of the "Pali Project" as an example. Although the Burma government and the Ford Foundation were able to reach a cooperation agreement quickly, the two sides never reconciled their ideological conflicts. Similarly, it is impossible for private organizations to completely dispel Burmese people's doubts about American cultural penetration. In March 1962, Ne Win, who came to power in a coup, spoke of his "concerns" about the Ford Foundation's funding during a meeting with Everton, the US ambassador to Burma. On April 12, the Burmese government officially informed the Ford Foundation that "assistance from foreign organizations is no longer needed in Burma" and gave its personnel six months to leave the country [20]. The Ford Foundation's cultural projects in Burma were forced to end.

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