

HIST3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past
The University of Hong Kong
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Dr Birgit Schneider

First Reflective Essay Assignment

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Why do History?

What is the purpose of History as a discipline? In my view, History is the study of what happened in the past. During the beginning of my freshman year, I took Dr. Peter Cunich's course *The Early Modern World*. When we discussed the purpose of History, Dr. Cunich would mention the Truth, with a capital T. From my perspective, the Truth simply means what *really* happened in the past. I think this is the most fascinating and promising reason of why one should study Transnational History. Coming from the Faculty of Business and Economics, where models are used to simplify reality into easily digestible case studies, it was fascinating to see historians delve into a mass of primary documents to find out what really happened.

One could view the idea of nations and nationalities as a model of simplification. The French, the Germans, the Chinese, these nationalities are embedded with stereotypes that subtly affect how we view the interaction between these people, but what if we used the idea of flows as a model instead? It might be more difficult and complicated than the current narrative but it would perhaps yield new insights into what really happened during that period of time, and in the end would give us a clearer glimpse of that elusive Truth.

Book Review

I've done one book review in another history course, *Stalin* taught by Dr. Oscar Sanchez-Sibony. The book was *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*,¹ and it was an extremely valuable experience. Perhaps owing to a lack of time and patience, I rarely read books in such depth, but the exercise of writing a book review really forced me to hone in on the key ideas, as well as the pros and cons of the book itself.

¹ Jan Pampler, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

However, I'm a bit skeptical about the purpose and utility of a book review. Personally, when I search for books for research papers, I feel extremely flustered when a link on JSTOR or HKU Dragon turns out to be a book review. I'm also quite suspicious of the reviewer and whether they did a good job of actually summarizing the book, because the arguments and evidence I want to find may be overlooked by the reviewer. I hope this more in-depth project can change my viewpoint on the value and nature of book reviews.

Ways of doing History

Speaking only from the courses I've done at HKU, I've always found our professors to be highly insistent on a transnational perspective. The only two courses which were not transnational that come to mind are the two biographical courses I took, which, given the subject material, is understandable. The two courses were *Hitler's Germany* and *Stalin*. Both dealt with highly mythologized "Great Men" (the word Great, in the case of these two men, only refers to the fact they were highly impactful on world events). Here I am skeptical whether world history is needed or applicable to these topics. Does World History mean the eradication of "lesser forms" of history? Does it mean that biographies are less valuable? These are questions that I would like to pursue.

From a personal standpoint, although the idea of studying flows is intriguing, I admit that these may not be the most interesting or exciting facets of historical study. Biographies center on one person and are hence more relatable. Nationalities and states are ideas that we've been exposed to from a young age and they too become characters in and of themselves. Flows and forces of history, on the other hand, seem from the outset less relatable to the regular reader of history. The movement of people, money and ideas, elevated to a level of historical reasoning that is quite new to most of us, may be less relatable and thus less interesting; thus, I hope to discover how can we make World History applicable and illuminating to the less academically inclined.

Assumptions in doing History

On a personal level, my worldview radically changed when I went to France for a semester abroad. I grew up in a relatively homogenous environment and attended a local school in Tai Po, New Territories. I spoke Cantonese at school, and in those twelve years I did not once have the opportunity to travel out of Asia. It was only until going to France, where for the first time in my life I became a minority, that I realized the world was a collection of extremely diverse people.

I was eager to see in person the things I had studied in my History courses, such as the monuments, the graves and the actual cities. What was really surprising was how many assumptions I had. For example, our readings were translated into English, but I realized that European countries and their people *spoke mutually unintelligible languages*. Another assumption that I overlooked was that *these people were white*. These assumptions seem silly in retrospect, but they made me realize how studying History without traveling and understanding other cultures could lead to viewing the discipline solely from the lens we are accustomed to.

The experience in France made me look both inward and outward. I applied the same curiosity I had about Europe to my own Asian roots and I realized I had much to discover. I realized that even if Hong Kong was already a city where “East meets West,” there is so much more in the world than just Europe, the United States and Asia. Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, there were entire swaths of culture, language, cuisine and most importantly *history* about which I had only the faintest clue, and I hope World History can enrich my understanding of the world as a whole.

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Jérôme PASQUIER

It is perhaps irrational for an individual to begin a world history course seemingly certain about the scope and nature of its content, assured of its *difference* from other history courses, confident in the unwittingly self-developed idea that it *transcends* “traditional” history - that is, topical history, national history, pin-pointedly dated, located, illustrated, personified, learnt, read, repeated, nationalised, glorified history - only to be mystified when confronted by what students all over the world dread producing in specific and well chosen words: a definition. What is world history? Here I am, in spite of my aforementioned certitude, finding myself pulling in various directions, sometimes contradictory, sometimes overlapping. Multiple definitions of what world history is or could (or should?) be occur to me, all seemingly justifiable in and of themselves but

not necessarily being able to logically co-exist. “World history” would be, in its simplest form, the history of the world from as far back in time as we know today: the history of our planet, the Earth, of our species, humans, of all species which inhabit our planet and with which we coexist, of all things however big or small comprising the universe, from atoms to galaxies. But is this gargantuan, 13.7 billion year history, *one*? Is it the sum of the histories of all things which add up to create the world today, from the history of algae to the history of bricks, from that of Neanderthals to that of McDonald’s? If so, then we have, in my opinion, gone full circle. If an additive, aggregate history of multiple specific and topical histories constitutes the history of the world, or world history, then it is not distinguishable from traditional history, however unconventional its field of study.

Pulling in another direction, I believe the term “world history” becomes more understandable as a specialised and distinguishable field of study when, counterintuitively, we use a non-global core, or base, from which we seek, through world history, to extrapolate ourselves, our thought, our view of past events; to transcend the traditional arena of historiography. An example in plain English: if we take the national history of states as our non-global core or base, it is then conceivable to proceed in trying to constitute a global or transnational history *distinguishable* and on a *different (often larger) scale* from the base. Similarly, if we take a specific event in a specific state as our non-global core, we can build a global historical view of that event by looking at how it was perceived in other places, how it affected those places or how these places affected it. A global view of the French Revolution could enquire into its ramifications from Haiti to Moscow; in more recent times, a global view of the Cuban missile crisis could look at its effects and reactions to it (if any) from Palau to East Germany. Contrastingly, looking within the GDR at interpretations, consequences, or reactions of the Cuban missile crisis from Dresden to Rostock, and within Rostock from its cadres to its shipbuilders, and within the shipbuilders’ community from the eldest worker to the youngest worker would be delving back into national history.

Alas, another problem arises: with the non-global core examples I have just given, I find the term “world history” itself to be problematic. Whilst my first paragraph on our common 13.7 billion year past encompassed the *world* - in the sense of atoms, molecules, gases, goldfish, alpacas, and junk boats -, my second seems to rely on an immovable framework, one which structures the point from which both the locality and the “global-ness” of history is determined: the state. Whether or not it comes into play with regards to the topic studied, the state serves today as the basic structure from which we can clearly define and distinguish world history, as it

is from our modern perspective the essential unit of measurement for all things “global” or not. For *human* history—that of revolutions, social strife, wars, science and, fundamentally, people—states, however loosely or precisely defined, form the starting point from which we can zoom in or out. This is assuredly the product of our education and socialisation, a human characteristic that today usually, if ironically, transcends *borders* (here again, a notion related to *state*). We as humans understand history from the national core that is the state, and it is therefore understandable for historians to do the same. In this case, is looking beyond state *borders* at the “bigger picture” more transnational history than world history? How can putting historical events in a bigger context avoid being lambasted as Eurocentric for frequently relating events to the action, interference, or influence of European states, biased for not being able to take in perspectives resulting from multiple societal, educational, and historical experiences, convoluted for trying to link historical events or entities centuries apart, or superficial for glossing over the details of history in an attempt to be as globally and temporally wide-ranging as possible?

At last, what is world history? Here I end my long interrogation and assuredly serpentine text, but upon its conclusion I cannot help but feel as though my search of definition has only produced to *definitions*, themselves propped up by seemingly endless questions. And yet, is that not the point? World history as a course and as a field of research should constantly ask these questions, as well as many more. Whilst I may hope for conceptual clarification and a firmer topical bedrock to latch myself on to, it would be both useless and counterproductive to do so if it were to limit the scope of what can be thought of, discussed, explored, and learned in the course of the semester. Definition is perhaps a nothing more than a hurdle, an unnecessary self-imposed limitation to new approaches and, ultimately, an impediment to a better understanding of where we all as a species, as cultures, as civilisations, and as individuals come from. I may not precisely know what world history is, but I do believe I have a sense of what it is not. And what a promising start to the semester that is.

Kooshin SO Ho Chun

World History seems to be a quite trivial and familiar term to me as it is used as the name of the History syllabus in the local curriculum that covers the development of Asia and Europe in

the twentieth century. However, having read Dr. Martin's article on world history,² I found that what was called "World History" in my secondary school curriculum may not be world history. World history is not only studying what happened around the world in the past, but also the training of a mindset to consider and analyse events and information in a big picture without national borders. This mindset is undoubtedly crucial and essential in the twenty-first century, when global integration is happening everywhere and every day. Our activities are no longer constrained within national borders, and national borders even become fuzzy. If our lives are no longer constrained by national borders, why do we still explain the past within national constraints? Trying to understand the past through a world history approach, we can have some new historical explanations and we may understand better why we behave as we do now since the factors affecting us are mainly from different parts of the world.

In the academic field, world history is crucial nowadays. The traditional approach that focuses on national history, which treats nations and governments as the major players in historical events, may be good for building up national identity, but may emphasize national policies or cultural factors too much, without putting enough focus on what roles other factors could have played in historical development. For instance, the reasons why the Industrial Revolution happened in England in the 19th century could illustrate how world history can provide alternative explanation for how things work and how different factors transform our world. The Industrial Revolution is always explained as the result of the Renaissance, development in Europe or suitable policies and systems in Britain. However, these perspectives often omit other factors, such as weather, natural resources and diseases, which were not controllable by humans but were important for the development of human history. While investigating history from the global perspective, Kenneth Pomeranz, one of the most eminent world historians, tried to explain why the Industrial Revolution did not occur in other parts of the world from the energy approach by arguing that coal mining in England played a crucial role in the Industrial Revolution.³ This means that the world historian can provide alternative explanations from beyond nation states. This is important as the role of states may be over-estimated while other factors are usually ignored or under-estimated.

² Eric Lane Martin, "World History as a Way of Thinking," *World History Connected*, accessed September 17, 2017, <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.2/martin.html>.

³ Kenneth Pomeranz, "Political Economy and Ecology on the Eve of Industrialization: Europe, China, and the Global Conjunction," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (2002): 425–46.

By reading monographs by world historians in this course, I could enhance my own understanding on a historical issue from how individuals, ideas, institutions or nature made historical development. The readings provide me a variety of noteworthy and unique points of view that could help me consider if the impact of nation states is as important as we usually think or not. Also, without considering nation states as the major players, world history can show how other factors or individuals affect nation states. This can help me understand the decision-making processes of governments, which do not decide what to do, but other factors force the government to do. Before having read any world history books, it is common for me to consider history that governments are very important in history as this is how history was taught in my secondary school curriculum. As a student who studied in Hong Kong, I am lucky that history was not taught with the strongly biased national approach which emphasises that the achievements in modern Chinese history constitute the successes of CCP leadership. However, nations are still the most important players in history taught in school. For instance, it was taught that the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95 was due to the expansion policies of the Japanese government. However, by reading world history books from the aspect of political economy, the reasons for the war were much more complex.

In this course, I hope to understand more about how world historians analyse historical events without treating states as the major players in history so I could understand what factors really play important roles in history. Before reading the book *The Great Divergence* by Kenneth Pomeranz,⁴ I never thought of how important energy and natural resources are in the development of world history. This reading experience highly stimulated my thinking of history and I started to find that government politics may not be as crucial as we usually think. Regarding the book review, I have chosen a book on the relationship between climate and pre-modern history. Historical books about the pre-modern age are usually written from the perspective of government policies or the church, but this book tries to address the issue from climate perspective. I hope to see if it can convince me that neither government nor church played the most important role in pre-modern history. This can also help me to consider the role climate plays in human development.

⁴ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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Megan WOOLLEY

To me, world history is about the relationships between countries, between states, and between people. In an increasingly global world, there is an obvious reason as to why this should be important. In a world where, now more than ever, people move and migrate and experience other cultures, history must be understood in these terms. Otherwise, we stand to lose that history.

When we feel history is irrelevant people begin to lose interest, and research loses funding. The biggest criticism I have heard of world history is that of its irrelevance to people. This thinking is understandable, although I do not agree. The model of history commonly taught and understood currently is focused on national history, emphasising the idea and actions of state, of country and of the borders of that state. Therefore, one of the reasons why this model of learning history is so pervasive, is because people feel they can identify with it. They can see how their people have progressed and what they have experienced. It is understandable to question whether people identify with a global history, with countries of which they may not have heard or of whose location they do not know. I feel there are several answers, and even criticisms of the current nation-focused model of history, which adequately explain world history's relevance in modern society.

First, we must acknowledge that history is not objective. It is more than facts, and figures and battle plans. Everything written has a purpose, and is written by someone with a perspective subjective to themselves. This is not necessarily harmful, it is a part of what – to me - makes

history interesting. In turn however, we must understand that any attempt to analyse or interpret or teach history comes with flaws and with biases. I have acknowledged that world history may seem irrelevant to some, regardless of whether I agree, however the same case can be made for national history.

There is an inherent disposition to focus on those who control the state, the country or the boundaries. As a British student, this means the history I have been exposed to (pre-university) is that of upper class, white Christian males. We leave out women, ethnic and religious minorities and lower classes, just to name a few. For example, knowing the focus on the British monarchy and British politics in educational curriculum, the only female figures included that I can think of are Victoria and Elizabeth I. However these women also controlled the boundaries. We learned about the suffragettes, but only because their ideas and efforts affected how politics went forward and because it affected the people who wrote about the period (consequently also usually white, upper class, Christian males...). Of course, there have been efforts to raise interest and focus on the history of women and minorities, which we can see in the examples of Black History Month in the US, and Women's History Week. However, this concept seems to me as if it is being presented as an 'alternative' history, or 'other' history, which itself holds negative connotations. The fact such things are not included in the concept of national history means we end up with a lot of missing knowledge, even about our own nations. This has been shown recently though the movie 'Hidden Figures', which tells the story of black women working for NASA in the 60s. The enormity of the contributions and influence of these women surprised a lot of viewers, as their stories and names were little known. The slogan 'Say Their Name' has been included in many online posts and comments which describe the actions of those who have been left out of history books.

So, if the criticism of world history is that of irrelevance, it cannot be denied that relevancy is also questionable with regards to national history. In the U.K., a large portion of the population will not identify with what I had been taught in my school curriculum. Not every British person is white, or male, or upper class, or Christian, or is even interested in national history. Where is their 'British History'? How would you stop them losing interest in history? For me, world history encompasses everyone. To understand a history without borders is to understand the history of people, of how people relate and influence and connect with one another. Of course national history will never be disregarded completely, however world history may be useful in ways that national history is not.

World history hopes to teach people about people: how have the relationships between neighbouring states influenced migration? How have trade routes influenced your culture? Many no-longer-surviving relationships affect modern society; the effects of colony, of empire, of migration and of trade are felt all over the world. This is what I hope to understand more fully within this course. Currently only three weeks in, this concept is all I have. I am hoping that learning about world history, both through the classes and through the book review, will enable me to understand the research more. I hope to find out exactly how different the ideas and themes are between world and national history. I hope to add more information, more knowledge and more evidence to my assertion that world history is relevant to modern society. I hope that the book review, and the peer-assessed portions will bring through new ideas and make this a stronger argument; the different cultural backgrounds, and different ways of thinking due to differing majors and philosophies, have already made for some interesting debates. I hope for this experience to make me a stronger historian, with a better understanding of the history of people.

Will WU Wai Man

World History as another perspective

At the beginning of the course, I have high expectations for world history. I see world history as an alternative, a superior alternative perhaps, to the traditional ways of doing history. In my knowledge, world history is a discipline defined by its approach. It deals with the large-scale, inter-connecting historical processes by ascending onto a global scale. World history challenges the pre-assumed boundaries such as state borders, religion, or ethnicity. Even boundaries themselves may become irrelevant, as we may become more aware of commonalities, rather than differences, across different nations. It should not be confused with the history of the world. History of the world is defined by its scope. It studies the world as the subject, examining the history of mankind such as the prehistorical period, archaeology, global trade etc. However, world history is defined by its large-scale approach. It does not necessarily have to cover the entire world, but it will surely move beyond individual nations.

World history can be an alternative to national history. National history sees nations, their states, governments, culture, or people, as the centre of inquiry. It may mention other nations, but they can only serve a minor role in completing the national worldview. On the other hand, world history can observe the shared experiences across different societies in the world. As

globalisation proceeds, there are increasingly more things that cannot be explained simply with a local focus, such as colonialism, world trade etc. In this way, world history can serve as an alternative to national history to explain these large-scale, global trends.

World history is also a powerful tool against dogmatism. Some people, such as amateur historians or non-historians, take history as lists of facts, dates and people in a textbook. And history is only a discipline to compile, verify and memorize these lists. Some other ideology-based approaches can be dogmatic as well. To them, history is subordinate to their theories that can be manipulated to verify their theories. The most extreme form can appear as simply gross distortion, such as Stalinist or Maoist histories. These dogmas may give readers a sense of certainty, but they may conceal contradicting facts and ideas to make the text seem irrefutable. World history, however, appreciates and values diversity. It draws its ideas from all different experiences in the different parts of the world. It allows different people to complement and challenge their viewpoints, drawing from their own experiences. World history and dogmatism are simply incompatible. Therefore, it can be a valuable tool to refute dogmatic narratives.

World history may also be a new way of investigation. Historical academic training teaches students to be very specific about time, space, countries, themes etc. After defining the scope, we will then review different sources, and synthesize them into a narrative. While this approach is excellent in explaining the process of a particular situation, it may become trivial. Outside of the audience of our field, the research may not be valuable. Besides, the approach will dismiss large-scale questions as being out of reach. World history, while still rigorous and focusing on details, enables us to answer larger-scale questions, and potentially reach larger audiences.

Therefore, I think world history is a powerful intellectual tool adding to the diversity and complexity of history. It offers an alternative to traditional ways of doing history. However, world history shall not completely replace the traditional ways of history. National history is more specific, and fitting to our own society and identity. We may see and experience our national history in everyday life, for example, in the heritage that can be seen in our city, when writers make references to national history, and in national history being written in our own language and taught in school. These make national history more approachable, and as a result, it has become an integral part of our society and identity. World history, on the other hand, is less approachable. Although it can well explain things like colonialism, trade, migration or empires, which have shaped our modern society, they are not things that people would have strong

connections with, and not things that can be seen in everyday life. World history cannot shape our identities as powerfully as national history. So, national history and world history have their own value, and neither should claim superiority.

Besides, there are some difficulties in writing world history. As it deals with questions of a larger scale, it might be harder to define a topic. Many things, from politics to trade, can be considered as world history. It may be unmanageable for a class to accommodate different topics, especially as many of us are doing world history for the first time. Sources may also be a problem, as we certainly would not be able to find our primary sources in local archives or in the library. Therefore, I think using a book review as a means of assessment for the course would be appropriate. We will have one book each person, and will read the book in-depth. While we learn the approach of that particular historian ourselves, we will learn from different authors without having to read through them, as different students will have different books. In this way, we can learn the diverse ways of how world historians approach their topics.

These are my initial thoughts about world history. They are likely to be changed in the future, as we continue to learn about world history.