

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 World History

I think world historians are addressing issues we face in an increasingly globalized world. One in particular is the need for a voice from regions that have not been included in traditional historical narratives. The bogeyman of the course, to me, was Eurocentrism. It haunted the periphery of our readings and discussions, and we were quick to rush and beat it to death with arguments if needed. It manifested itself most strongly in the article “The Case for Colonialism,”¹ and I am proud to report the article was derided incessantly in class.

Because of this background, I think World History in its current form has a liberal ideological slant. This became most apparent in our discussion of empires as a vehicle of World History, where the eurocentrism of empires was heavily criticized. Globalization is not another Western-driven wave of imperialism, since we all have a say in how we interact with globalization. World History is in a sense a product of globalization, and hence we have a say in how we interact with World History. I think that is the main reason to do World History.

How to do World History

To me, the biggest difficulty in doing World History is the higher level of rigor required. History, as I had argued in my first reflective essay, is a process of getting closer to the truth. Truth is extremely difficult to define since at any given second there are an infinite number of events occurring, thus to determine *which* are *significant* is not only a value judgement, it is limited by our searchlight. World History encourages the expansion of this spotlight to other cultures and other regions, whilst at the same time examining interconnections that may give rise to new insights on a certain event.

¹ Bruce Gilley, “The Case for Colonialism.” *Third World Quarterly*, (2017): 1-17.

I mentioned in my first reflective essay that nations were probably an abstraction used to make doing history possible. World History does away with the nation as an organizing principle, instead using transnational developments as the connecting thread. Diseases, wars, the environment; these are all transnational lens that the World Historian can use as their searchlight.

This makes World History hard, very hard. I had suspected this since the beginning of the course, now I can most definitely confirm it. I think one of the most interesting and unfortunately difficult questions I had posed in class is the question of *how*. In our last lesson, after we had ripped the 2010 edition of the *Global Progress Report*² to shreds, I asked: so how would a world historian do it differently? I wasn't completely satisfied with the answer, probably because using the unit of a year isn't the most effective approach in historiography. Nevertheless, it is an important question that many world historians will continue to wrestle with.

The anthropological approach?

Although World History is hard, I think the readings have given me hope that it is possible to do. Given my methodologically inclined mind, I found the last piece on McDonalds in Hong Kong³ a great example on how to do World History. An anthropological approach, whilst difficult, time consuming and most importantly *small* when compared to grand analyses of nation-states, was nevertheless the best examination of how globalization, culture and so many factors important to World Historians intersected in one tiny section of life in Hong Kong.

One of my biggest gripes about *The Crisis of Global Modernity*⁴, the book that I reviewed, was that it was separated from reality. In contrast, the ideas in the McDonalds article and the one about decisive battles were clearly presented. I think it is easy to confuse clarity for simplicity, turgidity for complexity. I think this further confirms my suspicions that even in a complicated field like World History, there is more than enough space for clear thinking, and the anthropologic approach is one such way.

² Alan Sorensen, "Global Progress Report, 2011: Globalization and the Problem of Evil." *Current History* 110, no. 732 (Jan 2011): 3-5.

³ James L. Watson. "McDonald's in Hong Kong: Consumerism, Dietary Change, and the Rise of a Children's Culture." in *Golden Arches East: McDonalds in East Asia*, ed. James L. Watson (Stanford, Calif: Standford University Press, 2006), 77-109.

⁴ Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Book review

The book review project, surprisingly, gave a tiny taste of academic politics. I did not like the book and found its writing turgid, but was surprised to see reviewers praising the book. No one seemed to want to pick apart the book with a “philosophical knife”; instead they skirted around the very legitimate issues about the book, namely that its core ideas were unwieldy and poorly explained. Instead, what I did find was euphemisms such as “rich”, “too grand”, and “difficult but worthwhile.”

Duara’s book was very ambitious, but in my opinion overreaching. His book title, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, promised a history of the world, but ended up reading more like a brain dump of ideas. In contrast, other books and readings zeroed in on one piece of transnational event or entity, and used it as a medium to explore relevant details across the world. They are histories, not ambitiously of the entire world, but most definitely transnational.

A final point about Duara is that much to my surprise, I did cite his arguments and his book often in subsequent discussions in our course, namely on ecology and globalization. I can see how, in response to the challenges of World History, Duara’s responses were not the clearest, but they were a step in the right direction.

My takeaways

I think the book review has taught me the importance of reading critically. I remember having a slight crisis a few days before submitting the first draft of the book review, afraid that I was too dumb to understand Duara’s book and therefore didn’t deserve to criticize it. I think this course, more so than any history course I’ve taken, gave us complete freedom in discussing the readings, and freedom meant we had the imperative to read critically.

Another very important thing I learned was reading the footnotes. In the seminar on diseases, Dr. Schneider admonished us to read the footnotes to see the author’s sources, and given the complexity of World History, I found it even more important to examine the footnotes to see the source of the author’s arguments.

I mentioned before broadening my worldview I had gained during my university studies was one of my main reasons for taking the course, and I am happy to report that the course has achieved this objective with respect to the past. World History is difficult, complex and at times frustrating, but I cannot imagine a future without it.

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Four months ago I wrote, perhaps naively, that "I may not precisely know what world history is, but I do believe I have a sense of what it is not." I believed it had to be the antithesis of commonplace topical history, of national histories told in books, drawn upon by politicians, glorified in monuments, and sold off in films. It was not—or more exactly, could not be—state-centric or national in any way. It necessarily had to go beyond borders, beyond a specific non-global, national, or local core that we usually refer to as our cognitive baseline when studying specific events in the past. What I had not realised was that, by framing my conception of world history in such a way, I had inadvertently created new barriers, new limitations in my own expectations. By thinking that world history was necessarily a different approach to "traditional" history, I had but altered the means and not the object of study itself. World history enables us not only to expand how we look at and interpret the past, but to open the doors to a whole new range of possibilities in narratives that can be revealed, arguments that can be made, and facts that can be brought to light.

World history is, in my opinion, best understood and most useful as an additional, albeit necessary, tool in the field of historical studies. The hindsight provided by the semester allows me to realise that expectations of new perspectives on specific instances of national history were misplaced. That is not to say that a transnational take on, for instance, how the Franco-Mexican Pastry War impacted third party nations, organisations, or individuals could not be interesting and

thought-provoking in its own right, but that world history is most valuable as a historiographical approach when it explores and reveals what non-global history cannot. Numerous examples of this arose in the course of the semester, such as in Mark Osborne Humphries' "Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic."¹ By choosing to discern the origins of the Spanish Influenza and how it spread across the world, Humphries transcends the notion of national, borders-bound history by creating a work of historical study that is both valuable in and of itself and relevant in a multitude of places on Earth. Conversely, it is for those very reasons that not all topics can, or should be, world history. Indeed, the possibility of going beyond the scope of national history is paralleled by a need for innovation in the choice of topics, namely in finding subjects that have the particularity of transcending borders, such as disease, environmental protection, experiences of colonialism and war, as well as, perhaps more pertinently today, globalisation. As such world history is a double-edged sword: it is a valuable expansion of the scope of historical study, albeit one with its own inherent limitations. Nevertheless, such limitations should not be interpreted as flaws per se, but rather an adaptation of expectations to the reality of the field.

The idea of a necessary adjustment of expectations when it comes to world history is undoubtedly a personal reflection stemming from my own expectations at the beginning of the semester, but nonetheless one which I believe may resonate with my classmates' own assessments of their respective experiences. Many of our discussions were centred on or included mention of what world history is or ought to be, particularly vis-à-vis the texts read by the class. Often works were considered "relevant" or "less relevant" to world history, some even being labeled "not world history" at all, or accused of various biases such as Eurocentrism. Whilst these critiques are naturally subjective, I believe they reveal the nuance that world history invariably carries with itself: the notion of "world" is dependent on context, on the topic explored, on its global relevance as defined by geographical spread on a map or cultural spread in the minds of individuals. For instance, Giancarlo Casale's "Global Politics in the 1580s: One Canal, Twenty Thousand Cannibals, and an Ottoman Plot to Rule the World"² is not global in terms of the geographic area it deals with, nor in terms of the number of countries invoked. Rather, its global nature rests in his astute demonstration that politics and events were linked together on a scale much larger than countries or regions, with events impinging on political strategies formulated

¹ Mark Osborne Humphries, "Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *War in History* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 55-81.

² Giancarlo Casale, "Global Politics in the 1580s: One Canal, Twenty Thousand Cannibals, and an Ottoman Plot to Rule the World," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (September 2007), 267-296.

around a cognitive map stretching from Flanders and Portugal to Indonesia. In a similar vein, James L. Watson's "McDonald's in Hong Kong: Consumerism, Dietary Change, and the Rise of a Children's Culture"³ is focused on the city of Hong Kong, yet brings together notions of global consumerism and cultural adaptation that are relevant almost everywhere in the world today. One could, however, understandably construe Watson's work as part of Hong Kong's own, "national" history; therein lies the subtlety in distinguishing world history from non-world history. After having read, thought, and discussed the matter for a semester, I do believe there is a particularity to world history that separates it from the rest, as I have mentioned before. However, attempting to draw a line between the two may be futile, as a clear-cut dichotomy between world history and non-global history is perhaps more a matter of semantics that does not detract from either's value.

This issue is particularly evident to me in the book I reviewed, Aiyaz Husain's *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World*.⁴ Indeed, Husain's work is neither a history of events happening throughout the world nor one of events that affected people on a global scale. Instead, it is a work of world history because the specific events he recounts, although fairly regional in scope, have had a lasting impact of global importance. They remain relevant today because of what they reveal in terms of state-level decision-making and foreign policy, regardless of which country is the focus of a study. World history derives its greatest strength from what it adds to the field. As long as it delivers what a traditional approach cannot, its separate nomenclature—and more importantly, its distinct value—are unconditionally warranted.

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Kooshin SO Ho Chun

Before this course, I naïvely thought that World History was nothing more than gathering sources from different parts of the world, so I only expected to learn how World Historians use a variety of information to argue that nation-states are not main players in history. However, World History is not as simplistic as I thought. It is a new method for us to rethink our history. World historians believe that all societies and nations are formed by individuals, and the impacts of individual decisions would not be limited by national boundaries, so historical studies should not be limited to within any national borders. Therefore, they usually do not focus on nation states but gather information from all over the world and different disciplines to focus on a small scope of history. Throughout this course, World History has expanded my understanding of how events happen through providing alternative explanations on linkages of events and challenging my unquestioned traditional beliefs.

Firstly, World Historians provide linkages between events in different regions. This is useful as the causes and impacts of an event may not be limited to within the borders of nation states. In the traditional approach of analysing history, historical events are usually argued to be the results of policies of different nation states. However, the world has been linked since the Columbian Exchange, so anything that happened here may affect people in other places. For instance, the origin of the 1918 Influenza, which affected the battlefields of World War I, was likely in China, thousands of miles away from the battlefields.¹ To arrive at this result, the author gathered scientific data, medical reports, and newspaper articles from that time to analyse. Without such

¹ Mark Osborne Humphries, "Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *War in History* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 55–61.

research in World History, gathering information from all over the world and from different fields of studies, we may not see the whole picture of the influenza epidemic. Providing explanations to unsolved historical mysteries through cross-disciplinary and cross-border research is one of the major contributions of World History.

Also, World History is a lens for me to look at things without traditional biases, which may restrict my thinking. Before having studied World History, I was taught that the origin of modernity was the Italian Renaissance, and I had never challenged this knowledge. However, one of the books in the sharing session showed me how World Historians looked at modernity differently.² This World Historian argued that cultural influence would not be single-directional from Europe to everywhere else, but that different cultures influenced each other. The book author mentioned that people living in the Italian Peninsula started the Renaissance through reviewing Arabic books and learning from Arabs. I noticed that some of my traditional beliefs may not be fact, but bias due to Eurocentrism. Reading World History can help me rethink whether those traditional beliefs are fact or bias.

Also, World History provides multiple explanations, which help us to understand why our lives are like that. I learnt a lot through writing my own book review, which is a major part of this course. I chose a World History book about climate history,³ in which the author argued how climate shaped humans' lives. In traditional thinking, our ancestors created civilisations because they were great. However, things should not be as simple. World Historians provide alternative explanations through integrating different data, from historical records to scientific data. Those new explanations are useful for me to understand the mechanism of how different things happen. It is crucial for us to understand how things happened in such way as it would affect how we decide in the future. For instance, studying climate history enhances my concerns about climate change as it may have a huge impact on our daily lives. World History provides alternative explanations, which had been ignored by traditional history, through looking at cross-border and cause-and-effect relations, as some factors outside the nation-state may also impact historical processes.

Despite the huge gain through learning World History, I also noticed that we have to be careful in explaining some historical events with a World History approach as it may bring more

² Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³ Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300-1850* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

harm to victims. For instance, in an explanation of the Holocaust, a World Historian might not treat Germany as the major player and they may explain that the Holocaust was caused by several events happening in different places across the World. Therefore, it could be argued that the responsibility of the Holocaust should not be borne by the next generation of Germans. Although this explanation could be valid, it would bring a problem in terms of the compensation of victims, as it may mean that only those perpetrators would have to compensate for the harm they did. It could be argued that the German government after the World War would not have had to compensate for the harm done by other individuals in the Nazi era, as they were not the ones who committed the crime.⁴ Therefore, when looking at wars in modern history, World Historians have to be careful as some of the victims of those historical events are still alive. Nonetheless, if we pay attention to undesired impacts of the explanation, World History can be useful for us to understand how things happen.

At the beginning of the course, I expected to learn how World Historians explained historical events without mentioning governments and countries, who I believed to be crucial players in history. However, this course changed my understanding of how things happen. World Historians do not avoid mentioning governments but explain government policies as the results of decisions of different individuals. Studying world history is a great opportunity for me to understand more about how different events occurred with a high complexity. Also, I learnt how to use different types of data to explain issues from looking at World History publications. It is crucial for my academic development as subjects should not limit our sources and explanations. To conclude, this course of World History broadened my horizons and helped me in my future studies.

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Having finished *Transnational History*, I can certainly say that it was one of courses I most looked forward to. It was also a course almost completely different from anything I had done before. When I had chosen the course, I was completely open with regards to what was expected of me, and I myself did not have many expectations of what we should be doing, as I hadn't had much to go from in my academic background. The courses I usually take in my home university, being based upon ancient societies, are niche and specific to a certain period, or place, or theme. Transnational (or world) history is a concept I knew of but with which had never been able to interact. As such, when looking back on my first reflective essay, while I still agree with most of what I have written, it is clear that my idea of world history is very one-dimensional. Beginning this course, I only wished it might inform me better on how to view and use research and improve my academic analytical skills. I had no pre-formed definitions of world history, beyond the idea that it must go beyond nationalised history.

Throughout the course, my idea of world history changed quite a few times, as I tried to find one specific definition. The fragmented nature of the discipline and subsequent lack of clarity, concerning what I could actually call "world history", was something I struggled with at the beginning of the course. By the end of this course however, it became clear that there is no set definition. Rather than searching for an idea of world history that fit into what I thought it might be, the result of *Transnational History* is an acknowledgment that there exist many facets and ideas of world history, which historians apply differently in their research. The content picked for the book review process inherently showcases this, as our books range from speaking of silk routes, to cocaine, to human-animal relationships, to war policies, to abstract philosophies, and theories on globalization and religion. World history for some may be based on the content of the research, such as analysing themes that are not geographically specific (for example, environmental history). For some, world history is a method applied to presenting their analysis,

perhaps in attempting to go against “Eurocentric” perspectives. For others, world history is something other than this altogether.

Aiding my own thoughts on world history, were the in-class discussions about the chosen articles, and the book review process. My classmates have different thought processes and backgrounds, and brought many points to the discussions, which I would not have even thought of had I just been reading the article for myself. However, this also presented many trains of thought from the same article, which we could have easily discussed for another two-hour class. This duality also came through during peer review of our book reviews, which fundamentally I find a useful idea, but also one that might cause frustration. Ultimately, the knowledge that one person might find a certain point interesting that another found confusing made me really review how I write and present my own work. The process of producing a detailed book review made world history and the actions of ‘being a historian’ (or an academic in general), so to say, more tangible. These aspects of the course also reinforced a focus on critical thinking and of evaluating the usefulness of our readings.

My own view on world history has remained positive. The range of articles, in both topic breadth and depth, has really emphasised the utility and need for world history. It is a fragmented and diverse discipline, but the discussions in class felt centred on whether they constituted as world history, and on our thoughts about how they worked within the discipline. World history has shown itself to be relevant to my own studies as a history student. Having said this, it also became obvious by the end of the semester that world history is relevant to much more than only the history students. That we could read articles from people other than historians and conclude they could also contribute to world history is an example of this. In seeing the diversity of world history: articles on war, or gender, or environmental history, or even McDonalds, has shown me that world history is applicable to many things. It has also encouraged me to focus on including perspectives that may subvert or challenge accepted historical or national narratives in my further studies, and indicated the importance of doing so. Lastly, while it is clear that the discipline of world history is only starting, given the necessity of such research, and of the quality of the research so far, it is obvious to me that it must continue.

Will WU Wai Man

During the course, we encountered so many different materials of world history, but they are so diverse that a common theme cannot be easily identified among them. The term “world history” sounds more like an umbrella term of all kinds of different scholarly interests. Scholars may have worked on their own interests, which could have some global elements to be qualified as global history. The migrating prostitutes in our reading cannot be easily compared to British imperial imaginations of “mental maps” in one of our book reviews. Despite being both in the British empire, there is little consistency or similarity between them as one deals with migration of the underprivileged, and another with perception in high politics. In that sense, world history sounds like a collective term covering hugely diverse interests.

If world history is only a collective term, scholars of very different backgrounds would be all contributing to world history, and we may need to grasp very different knowledge, even from many other disciplines, to understand them. In our course, we encountered feminism, medieval history, colonial studies, anthropology, etc. It can be very difficult, if not impossible, to understand them all. To be honest, I cannot handle the feminist materials well, because I am not familiar with its approach and the assumptions behind it. However, one does not need to do so. World history can be specific to a subject that affects people globally. These are things such as climate, trade, commodities, and empires, covered in the course and our book reviews. So one does not need to understand all different intellectual approaches before writing world history. This is very different from my initial thoughts about world history. I used to think world history is a more general, grand way to look at history, but now I understand it to be a small scale, specific view on a global topic. My current view on world history has been changed by the course.

If we understand world history in this way, it can be used to address our present problems. There are increasingly more things which need to be understood in an international context. For example, we cannot isolate the European migration crisis from the Syrian Civil War, and the Arab Spring before that. The Occupy movement in Hong Kong was motivated by the Occupy movement in New York, yet one may still find similarities with the earlier social movements of the 1960s. It will be difficult to explain these events if we only limit ourselves to one place and one discipline. World history can be a way to re-discover the lost links between all those events by showing how countries are interconnected, thus giving a more comprehensive way to look at our present problems.

However, I also think it is not enough using only world history. Local context still matters. In world history, Eurocentrism still remains a problem which we repeatedly criticised in our classes. It is obvious that our course takes more materials from Europe and Asia than from the rest of the world, like Africa or Latin America. These researches may not reflect the reality in other parts of the world. We have read an anthropological article on McDonalds in Hong Kong, which taught us how a global trend can be adopted differently across places. Therefore, I think there is a need for local adaptation when using world history.

I think this viewpoint is inspired by my book chosen for book review. The book is about Andean cocaine. The author, Paul Gootenberg, is an economic historian focusing on Peru. Gootenberg localises the discussion of cocaine to Peru by identifying key local actors and processes, showing the importance of Peru in the early legal cocaine industry. This makes this book very different from the criminal, medical, and often non-localised accounts of cocaine, and it can really add value to our current discussion of narcotics.

Speaking of the book review itself, the project has introduced book review to me as a rigid academic genre. This is my second time writing a book review. However, the last time was more like a student assignment where the objective seemed to be showing that I have read the book and have good knowledge of its contents. In this course, however, instead of dumping all the information I knew, I will have to think of my readers. I need to be concise and provide points that are really going to help other readers to grasp the book. Besides, I have to offer reasonable critiques that are based on reflections and facts. This time, I am feeling like writing like a real historian. This introduced me to book reviews as a rigid, academic genre of writing. Before, I usually skipped the book reviews in research, and looked at the book directly. Now, I think I will read book reviews as a part of my research. That puts me in dialogue with the academics, and helps me find useful sources.

Apart from the formal writing, I also find the discussions and feedback valuable. They are structured like an academic seminar, in which we need to make and defend our viewpoints to our fellow students. I realise that I am not good at giving my own opinion. I am too used to summarising and analysing materials, instead of giving my own critiques and comments. I think I will be more conscious of it when it comes to other courses. I also like being given feedback on our book reviews. It gives us a chance to refine our writing, and looking at our works from the viewpoint of a reader.

I have enjoyed the class this semester. I wish to thank Professor Birgit Schneider who made this class possible and also my classmates.