

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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There are three major ways through which I try to approach the course HIST3029, and therefore these are three points wherein my expectations of the course lie.

First is evidently the theme of transnationalism. On the one hand, it is an issue closely related to my identity, the narrative of my personal history. I consider myself privileged in that I have had multi-national and multi-cultural upbringing. While i am happy with who I am, I no longer could accept nor be accepted by the traditional national identity. I have been playing a tug of war with my motherland, wrestling to see whether it is the Korean heritage or the acquired foreign values that shape me.

On the other, theoretically, the very issue of national background and citizenship has started to vex me. It has changed the way I perceive the world of politics and economy: Can the tensions in the northeast Asia be solved in a trans-national perspective? Interaction of social values and norms is another issue: What happens if different cultural values meet and clash? To what extent can we be tolerant of one another? Can we find a common set of objective and timeless values?

The list of "transnational questions" goes on, and I look forward to seeing what history, or to be correct, a new approach to history can yield to our benefit.

Second is the act of history writing. I would like to examine the dynamics involved in historical writing and reviewing it. To introduce a relevant anecdote, I attended a book reading of a romantic history writing named <Mrs. Adams in Winter>. It was a narrative that portrayed the 19th century continental Europe through the frame of an individual's journey. The author raised interesting issues regarding objectivity and interpretation in historical writing. As someone who has had a grating experience of history education as memorising of the most insignificant "factual" events, I am greatly interested re-writing history, putting forth my own agency in interpreting history.

Of course the book review exercise would provide a concrete opportunity to give it a shot. As I have mentioned in today's discussion, my book's subject, America is a very special case in terms of nationalism. It is an immigration nation that is theoretically open to all who wish to be a free American and yet I seem to see exceptions or complications under the surface. I seem to see a possible link between one's status as an American and his or her origin and dedication to it, in that Asian immigrants seem to be considered exotic and unintegrated.

Indeed I observe that being an American involves leaving behind, to an extent, one's heritage.

I have seen very few European Americans who speak a continental language. I wonder what the author, in his meticulous examination, has to offer to the questions I have. And I am excited as to see what role my assets --a Korean-born with English literature degree both in Hong Kong and in Europe --will play in the reception of his work.

Third is class discussion. This course appears promising of great dynamics and spontaneity that verbal discourse allows, perhaps not so viable in the written kind. My few expectations of the course I have stated so far will be, I hope, complemented both in their width and depth by interactions that I make with the rest of the group. I very much look forward to the identities and ideas that other students bring to the issue of transnationalism as well as their feedback directly to my own. Better yet, in a completely constructive sense our individuals elements and contributions may come together to form a novel and brilliant idea. Last but not least, I expect myself to become a better debater who can verbally articulate these matters of great personal importance.

Ke (Ellen) HU

The Beginning into World History

One common afternoon during last winter, I was sitting inside the Maughan Library of King's College, London, listening to a series of speeches about the history through manuscript. Speakers came from various parts of the world. Although their originalities and topics mainly located in Europe, the only female participator drew immense attention. To my surprise, she talked about China, about Chinese history through ancient records. This inclusion of the Asian other, for the first time, inspired me of the possibility to look into the world history through one common issue. The overwhelming excitement and curiosity filled my mind. Then I start to wonder if I could do something broader than my country's history alone.

One week later, with invitation from the female professor, I joined a seminar focusing on comparative history, with scholars coming all around the world. The topic that day was the divergence between western and eastern culture. Throughout the discussion, I was filled with macro analysis of these two world cultural extremes. And the only comment that I could make is to question the credibility of translation, which was widely used in this field of research. Although it was broadly accepted that the word "soldier" and "卒" are equivalent in different linguistic systems, it seemed to me that they had distinctive signified. Their spirits, goals as well as cultural significance were totally different. As a result, I was afraid that this research may easily fall into a euro-centric framework, which blindly borrowed and assimilated other cultures' symbols in order to compare different histories according to a simplified and westernized standard not only through language. The mindset to assimilate everything belonging to the "other" was really so dangerous although commonplace. That's why my concerns about researching comparative history were magnifying together with my everlasting curiosity.

However, there seems to be one possible solution to my concerns appearing after I attended the first classes of Transnational History: a New Perspective on the Past. Although the first reading by Hanna Schissler still distributes the majority of her efforts on western narrative, her promotion to listen to the “others” and include multiple voices into the textbook in order to build a critical but comprehensive understanding does attract me.¹ Moreover, the disorientation that people feel throughout the globalization explains exactly what I was thinking when I sensed the shock from other hegemonies and narratives.² Hence I understand that the motivation encouraged by the disoriented feeling to remediate and question the original hegemonic storytelling can greatly prevent people from ignorance and prompt them to reconstruct the past by their own efforts. As a result, to a great extent, I agree with Hanna’s opinion that this changing world needs a much more open mind to absorb knowledge from all directions and examine them in a critical but respectful way.³ This should be the world history approach.

As a result, I recognize two obvious advantages of world history based on my current understanding as well as Schissler’s article. Firstly, doing world history needs the researcher to treat the globe as a whole. It doesn’t divide the world into separate parts and select the major one as criteria, like comparative history. Rather, it focuses more on the commonality and diversity, communication and mutual-influence. It looks at the whole world as a developing entity on the move. Hence, the global and holistic view provides the world history historians with a unique way to observe what has happened: how different countries influenced each other and how the relationship shaped the past of this world. And this fusion, not only from historical perspective, does appeal to the trend of globalization, contrary to the past segregation among regions.

Secondly, the research into world history described by Schissler is not aimed at collecting local and global knowledge widely only, but also at giving all marginalized individuals enough respect in the historic narrative.⁴ It will try to avoid blind borrowing and immoral stratification among nations and cultures. Only if the researchers always maintain this consciousness to treat all the information they come across as equal as possible, can the discipline jump out of the trap of not only euro-centrism, but also any other potential centralism. And then it is probable to challenge the original hegemonic narrative. I do hope that I can adhere to this creed throughout my research, especially in this classroom.

More importantly, in terms of what I expect to learn from this course, although I know that I need to acquire substantial amount of basic knowledge, like the function and significance of book review, I also hope that my understanding of the world will be refreshed if I keep my mind open. Also, I am sure that this course may challenge some of my stereotypes and urge me to irrigate a more critical mind. I am really looking forward to this training on thinking. And I will tell myself to keep asking, keep curious as well as keep working.

¹ Hanna Schissler, "World History: Making Sense of the Present," in *The nation, Europe, and the world: textbooks and curricula in transition*, ed. Hanna Schissler and Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 240.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Last but not least, I want to express my excitement toward the collaboration. For me, history as well as the academia is always intangible and vague. But journals are a visible battlefield for argumentation. Through the articles, various opinions collide with sparks. And the researchers devoting their studies to similar topics meet while learning from and commenting on each other. Just as one Chinese saying goes: “The more you argue, the closer you are to the truth.” I am now planning for a whole series of argumentation, in the classroom, with the author of my book as well as the editor and future readers. Now, I feel that I am an armed soldier prepared for years who is finally able to go to the field. And now, I am ready for the challenges.

Raphael NGAI

I am glad that I get a chance to “taste” a new historical study through taking HIST 3029 Transnational History. At the beginning of the course, I wish to address my understanding on world history, my expectations to the course and the collaboration with the journal *The Middle Ground: World History and Global Studies* and their usefulness on my current historical studies.

World history is history in bigger scale in a sense. It sees the entire human civilization as a whole and is not limited by political or territorial borders. It examines the general movements of human beings in history and looks into the encounters and interactions of various civilizations, seeing how they co-exist on this planet, in harmony and conflict. World history allows us to think about why the world today is not united into a single country. The world has been globalized with transportation, communication and exchange of human activities in political, economic, cultural and social aspects. However, it exists in the presence of different countries, who have different systems of government, races, languages, religions, customs and lifestyles. Human civilization continues to “function” with similarities and differences between different groups of humans. The examination of this complicated relation makes world history studies important.

In world history, historians can have a bird’s-eye view on the general movements and activities of human civilization. The best example is migration. Humans always “moved” in history, during new territorial discovery, serving as overseas labour, escaping wars and natural disasters. These issues involve more continents, which is an approach that national history cannot effectively address. The issue of natural disasters can also demonstrate the role of nature in human history, making world history more meaningful.

World history is “new and fresh” to me because it does not exist in secondary school education and in most universities in Hong Kong. World History is an advanced field of research. Transnational historians have to handle huge number of sources because they have to deal with different races, countries and continents when discussing certain global phenomenon or movements. Strong organizational and analytical skills are required. This makes world history special and challenging to study.

In this course, I hope to learn about theories and terminologies of world history, reviewing its literature and current international research. I hope to adapt to transnational history through the book review project on Christian Wolmar's *Blood, Iron & Gold: How the Railways Transformed the World*. Wolmar mainly examines how railways spread modernity to the world but I wish to put it further. May be I can bring other themes from future seminars like urbanization and migration to make my project more diversified.

There are other themes which I want to explore, for instance, trade. Different civilizations are always connected by trade, which brings benefits, money and precious goods. Western colonizers, from the Portuguese to the British, came to Asia for purchasing silk, spices and tea, selling their products and obtaining raw materials. Trade continues to play an important role in modern era. Trading agreements are renewed among countries to show goodwill and cherish closer cooperation. Even conflicting countries will continue to trade with each other, particularly on a non-governmental level. Economic blocs and organizations are also formed, the World Trade Organization is the largest one. Trade is a practical and powerful force which fosters globalization and I think it is worth discussing in class.

I am also interested in the issue of the "western-dominated world". There is an impression that the world is "western-dominated" because westerners took the initiative to globalize the world through colonial expansion. This formulation is not accurate. The world consists of not only the West, other parts of the world also play their roles. Being a Chinese historian, I believe globalization was initiated by China, who wanted to assimilate the "barbarians" outside her borders with Confucian rites, for which the voyages of Zheng He are a prominent example. It is also worth noting that colonialism was challenged by independence movements in the twentieth century. In this sense, the West is no longer dominant. My classmates come from different countries. We can brainstorm and gather our thinking on this issue in seminars, which will further diversify or change my understanding on world history. *The Middle Ground* is a specialized journal which gathers various scholarly views on world history. The collaboration also offers me a channel to express my world views.

World history is relevant to my current history studies. I have studied Chinese, Japanese, American and European history in my first and second years at university. These courses focused on a specific country or region and at a specific time period. HIST 3029 offers me, in my final year, a platform to "conclude" and "summarize" what I have learnt before. For instance, I have studied the Two World Wars and the Cold War in my previous history courses but I did not realize that I was doing case-studies of a broader theme of War in the perspective of world history. Wars happened in different periods of human civilization, and on different scales. By studying world history, I hope to investigate why wars always happen in human history, in what ways wars are different or similar in different historical periods, and what meanings wars have for human beings. These would be valuable for me to make my understanding of war and other historical themes more complete.

To summarize, I think world history is a bigger kind of history and an advanced learning subject. It allows historians to observe general human movements, and examine the

diversities and similarities of the human community. I wish to learn about certain theories,

review research of world history, and discuss themes like the “western-dominated world” and trade. I believe world history will be useful to my current history studies. I can revisit the historical topics which I have studied before in a transnational approach. I think this would further deepen or even change my understanding on these topics at the end of this course.

William WILSON

Given that this is my first subject which has discussed the concept of ‘world history’, and I would imagine that my classmates are in a similar situation, it seems prescient to elaborate my, no doubt ignorant, understanding of the topic. The addition of ‘world’, or global, transnational and similar terms, to the subject of history to me seems like a very deliberate announcement as to the scope of the topic. If one were to examine the word through the oft used dichotomy of micro and macro, it would surely be placed towards the latter. Perhaps more insightfully, to borrow a word from macroeconomics, Keynes’ ‘animal spirits’ came to mind fairly soon after I began to consider what the field might entail; that is, great collective movements across both time and space. Therefore, from the perspective of us as individuals, and in stark contrast to ‘Great Man theory’ our own human actions may not have much of an impact, but conversely, we cannot help but ignore the big picture and its impact on us and our ancestors in past and present.

Nevertheless, to take the thoughts of Margaret Thatcher (or her speechwriter) ludicrously out of context, “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families”; or in the context of world history, that of course the macro is intrinsically linked with the micro. As such, as unimportant as myself and my family’s place in the world surely is, it of course moulds my individual understanding of, without trying to sound overly poetic, the tectonic shifts of mankind. I would argue that from my limited knowledge of my familial history, that I am extracted from people with more of a global perspective than most. To elaborate, on my father’s side, this relates primarily to commerce; the ownership and management of textile production facilities in the United Kingdom was a task with global scope. Procurement of raw materials required the ability to comprehend the world as one great possibility, and indeed wool was sourced from all over it. Unlike the more perfect knowledge available today, in the past this meant spending many months each year away from home in search of new partners. Similarly, sales required the understanding of global markets, since products manufactured in England were shipped to every corner of the globe. In respect to my mother and her ancestors, even more of an emphasis can be placed on the physical movement of humanity. Over one hundred and fifty years ago, this involved relocation halfway around the world, as some of the earliest settlers of the ‘free’ colony of South Australia; in actuality this was more the freedom to impose the authoritarian aspects of the Protestant work ethic more thoroughly. However, far from merely sinking back into the age-old village mindset like so many who colonised the new world, my mother was instead raised by parents who reveled in the adventure of their exploration. As such, much of her childhood was spent living in Indonesia, as well as Europe and northern Australia. Indeed, I

feel as though my own childhood was defined by my fascination with all the disparate places

I was taken by my own parents, notwithstanding the relocation of my home. When I announced my goal to visit every habitable continent this year, I was met with interest and support, rather than the more expectant worry of the unknown.

Having been unnecessarily boring with the particulars of my life, it might be best to address the more relevant question of how world history could be useful? Well, to point out the obvious, history is seemingly about comprehending and understanding what has led us to this moment in time, and naturally such an all encompassing discipline could hardly be harmed by an additional lens. Similarly, the founding of various centers of global and transnational history around the world, in order for academics who wish to explore history from this perspective to do so with like-minded colleagues, is a perfectly reasonable idea. It goes without saying, but an emphasis on national history almost inevitably results in, at the very least, only limited understandings of phenomena that transcend political and cultural borders, not least in the movements of people, goods and ideas around the world. Unfortunately from my personal perspective, the more I learn and explore the world, through the study of history or otherwise, the less I seem to understand it. Nevertheless, a lack of understanding need not subtract from being interested in a topic, which given I chose to take this course, I surely am.

Finally, I am quite looking forward to completing the book review project, and not only for the potential of being able to say that my writing has been published in a journal. Presumably as with review assignments in past subjects, we will be required to draw upon the work not only of the author of our chosen book, but also previous reviewers of the book, in order to demonstrate our views in either agreement or contrast to other historians. I have always enjoyed listening, subsuming and dissecting other people's opinions, and furthermore I think that the scholarly peer review process is a valuable means of discourse within the field. From what I have seen from the topics presented in the course syllabus, there will be ample room for discussion in classes as well, and given my experiences so far, it should be a fairly relaxed, open environment in which to do so. All told, then, this subject seems a natural fit in my ongoing attempts to comprehend the world around me, as well as the blood and experiences that make up my individuality.

Birgit SCHNEIDER (Instructor)

When I was deciding what to teach in the academic year of 2013/14 and realized that the department had a course on transnational history on the books, it was an easy choice. World history had been one of the fields of study at Washington State University, where I earned my doctorate, and with my two disparate-yet-connected areas of study (German and Japanese history), world history is simply a reality for me, and an exciting and meaningful one at that. While putting together a schedule, assignments, and readings, I had to remind myself repeatedly to not get too carried away: this was not going to be a graduate seminar after all, where I could assign a different book every week, for example. After the first three sessions, however, I feel somewhat confident about my approach, the assignments, the readings, and the overall structure of the course. There are four students (down from eight, of whom three

never showed up and one who dropped after the third week, plus one from a completely

unrelated discipline who sat in for a session and seemed reasonably interested but never came back): one from Hong Kong, one from China, one Korean, and one British-Australian exchange student, plus me, the German instructor ... how appropriate for a world history class.

The course title is “Transnational history: A new perspective on the past,” but I understand and teach this course as a world history course, regardless of what the title is. Already in the first lesson, one of the students suggested that transnational history would be limited to those historical times when nations existed—no trans-national without the national—and I agree. In a sense, transnational history could be understood as opposite to world history, because it retains the nation as the fundamental unit of analysis, stipulating that things happen across national borders, yet still with nations as actors. This is not what I want to do, and this is not the perspective that I want to transmit to my students.

As an introduction to the class, I showed my students David Christian’s TED talk “The History of our World in 18 Minutes.” Only afterwards did I realize that this may have suggested to them that big history is world history. I still decided to stick to my course schedule and postpone a session of thorough definitions until the end of the semester. As a response to the TED talk, we had a good discussion about the turning points that Christian outlined, nation, and identity. I assigned two texts about world history for the second session, but the discussion ended up being a bit too short because I deemed it necessary to offer a brief historiographical overview—how did we get to world history in the first place? It included Ranke, the Annales School, Marxism, and Foucault, and it took longer than I thought it would. Nevertheless, I believe in the discussions format, not least because my own classes as a graduate student were made up mostly of discussions in which I learned and understood a lot; I hope it will be a similar experience for my students now.

Another part of this course is a book review project, in which the students will learn how to evaluate and write reviews of academic books. With monographs being, in a sense, the backbone of the discipline, and reviews being a way for the historians’ community (if there is such a thing) to get and stay in touch with the rest of the field, this project seeks to achieve two goals. On the one hand, it attempts to give students exposure to what historians actually do, and thus offer a deeper understanding of history and how it is created. In this regard, the course will constitute a platform to discuss in what ways this is useful and meaningful, for history students and the larger community. On the other hand, it aims at training students in writing, critical thinking, and their analytical skills. Not everyone will become a historian, academic or not, after graduation, but to write (for publication, in a journal!) and to examine others’ writing is an essential skill in the workplace today, wherever this workplace may be.

Why do we do world history in the first place? Our world is a globalized one, in which instant communication and fast transportation between all corners of the globe are not only possible but a vital part of everyday life. When I visited my then-boyfriend for the first time after his move to the United States, I marveled at the fact that it took me no more than twenty-four hours to get there—from a mid-sized town in central Germany to Eastern

Washington (it was still very long, and very far, but that is beside the point). Living now

approximately 5500 miles away from where I grew up, the social and communication platforms that the internet offers are part of my daily routine, permitting me to stay connected with family and friends. I have lived, studied, and worked in several countries, which has, I believe, made me aware of a lot of differences and commonalities across cultures and between humans. To study the ways in which people with different perceptions, backgrounds, and outlooks have interacted with each other, historically and globally, is, in my opinion, the essence of world history. In order to navigate a present that is increasingly interconnected and in which information about any place and anything is so readily available, world history can be a tool to make sense of it: world history offers ways of appreciating the big and the small, the different perceptions, the fluid boundaries and the similarity of the human experience; the sheer distances as well as the proximity, and most importantly, the incredible complexities. Historians explore where we come from in order to explain who we are. A globalized world needs world historians, and I hope to transmit to my students some of their skills and perspectives.