

HIST3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past
The University of Hong Kong
Semester 2, 2013-14
Dr. Birgit Schneider

Second Reflective Essay Assignment

Joo Hun HAN

The following is a reflection on my encounter with world history through the course HIST3029: Transnational history. Specifically, I am going to discuss the extent to which it has changed my view of history and the world. I will refer to both the class material and the book of my choice for the review. Lastly I will comment on the overall experience of this seminar course.

I would like to stress the meaning of this course as an initial step away from national history. I evaluate the major achievement of this course as making that departure in our understanding of various issues. I have now a solid, although preliminary, sense of world history as opposed to national history. I have seen the merit of giving voice to bodies other than nations, the merit of tracing history for goals other than to incorporate it into a national narrative. I am very satisfied in this regard that my rather vague expectations have come to fruition.

Memorable articles of this class include “Afansii Nikitin: An Orthodox Russian’s Spiritual Voyage in the Dar Al-Islam, 1468-1475” by Mary Jane Maxwell and “The Concept of ‘Decisive Battles’ in History” by Yuval Harari. In the first one the author pieces together various aspects of Orthodox merchant Nikitin’s journey into the Islam. The theme of religious conflict and awkward convergence is examined in the personal journey of Nikitin, as exemplified in his thoughts and habits. In the second, the author challenges the oversimplified focus directed at major battles and directs our attention to measure the full implications of wars that tend to remain invisible and unrecorded. To name one aspect of its departure from national history, the author directs the reader’s attention to preparations and consequences behind major wars in economical and social senses, other than the conventional political sense.

However, the exploration of world history has not been without problems. Importantly, I hold reservations for its un-interpretative, “descriptive” narrative of some the history writing that I came across. Such narrative comes in direct contrast with one important expectation that I stated in my previous reflective essay, that history is shaped by meaningful interpretations. In other words I understand history to be an act of evaluating the past that rewards us with some guiding imperatives. For example, as mentioned in class, the article on the Spanish flu discussed a great breadth of materials that, impressive and informative as they were, did not speak to me in an authoritative manner. My impression was that the argument was not tangibly stimulating such as one that holds great relevance to life today, or one that elucidates our understanding of the subject. I was more or less at a loss.

While I acknowledge that the interpretation does not and should not take place at the nation level, I am confused at the absence of it. I still cherish historiography as something that enriches the understanding of human beings, and wish to see it applied to our identity other than as citizens of a nation.

In this context the book of my choice, *Melancholy Order* by McKeown, makes a highly interesting case. I was surprised to discover that, contrary to its purportedly global perspective, it was a full-fledged national, un-global and specifically orientalist kind of book: How Asians were marginalised and discriminated in terms of their rights to migrate by western nations. I assume that the book's focus on the pragmatic and legislative aspect of migration necessarily defines its nature thus. While some of the author's findings on international order are thus remarkable, another bulk of discussion initial, pre-national stages of migration seems to remain fragmented, unassimilated to the larger argument. The book also contains the very issue of un-interpretation, or the lack of interpretation; I see the author, unfortunately, lost in his ambitious research and not linking every chapter to his main argument.

My mixed reaction to world history, both the course material and the book should reflect that world history is for me still a novel discipline. I should acknowledge that my views on history may be deeply flawed and that I am abusing the element of interpretation, taken from literary studies, to history. Perhaps I am mistaken to assume world history to be an antithesis and a remedy to conventional national narrative; it may turn out to serve rather as an alternative and a complement. In any case, that I can extend my discussion to that of historiography as a whole is an important achievement of this course.

Interestingly it has allowed me to see the contemporary world and its current affairs beyond the scope of nations. I have noticed, for one, that recent disasters such as the assumed crash of the Malaysian Airlines plane affect more than one nation in its repercussions. I imagine that studies of disasters would invite a rich set of world history approaches.

Last but not least I have greatly enjoyed the heated discussions of this seminar course. I think I have made visible progress in terms of understanding and participation. The course itself was world history; we were able to be both global and national as our discussion ranged from the specific cases of Hong Kong, China, Korea, the UK, Australia and/or Germany, to the collective global. I appreciated the cumulative and collaborative nature of the workload; as everyone made equal process with their projects, there was a plenty of reciprocal influences.

Ke (Ellen) HU

The End is Another Beginning

Now, you are listening to me, a girl from in a small town in a non-coastal area of China that people barely talk about, a non-native English speaker who can never remember the

difference between “intimate”, “imitate” and “intimidate” as well as an undergraduate who is

majoring in comparative literature rather than history. And if you are asking me why I love world history, your current attention to my essay is exactly the reason why I am grateful for this inclusive discipline, which enables multiple voices, including me, to speak out.

However, instead of being obsessed with the multiplicity existing in world history narrative, this essay will focus on three other inspirations that have influenced me the most throughout this course: world history's subversive nature, its demand for wider knowledge, as well as a critical mind to evaluate whether all so-called world history books are really world history.

First of all, world history is subversive. Not only does it further visualize a newly emergent historical approach, akin to women's history and cultural history, it also undercuts the previous hegemonic and fixed narrative. For example, from a world historian's perspective, war can be analyzed beyond national rivalry. And the study of disease can also reveal the history of bureaucrats, cultural discrimination and international transportation. Moreover, just through revealing all these diversified aspects of the past, world history can not only challenge original historical story-telling which mainly sheds light on those in power, but is also going to subvert this discipline to a certain degree by asking whether the original narrative is the most important and whether those recognized factors, primarily economic and political ones, could truly explain everything that happened in the past. If someone still believes that the answer is yes, it is the world historian who will show them how African tribes, the symbolic meaning of tea or the vegetation of the Amazon have changed the development of a war, a nation as well as the world.

Secondly, world history requires researchers to acquire knowledge as wide as possible. Because the discipline breaks the confinements of time, space and even subjects during the research, world history demands vast amounts of skills and information, which may even seem to be irrelevant. While mastering multiple languages should be a basis, world historians could also benefit from knowing how to assess a ship, to drink tea with milk properly, or to appreciate tribal people's lifestyles. But most importantly, the researcher should also be able to paraphrase his or her own findings into an easily understandable and approachable narrative. Only in this way can the output of world historians spread to a larger population, and then help to remove the wall between the academia and the public gradually in order to raise common people's awareness to question the master narrative, and construct their understanding independently. It may also help to empower ordinary people to speak out in public.

Last but not the least, like any other newly popularized idea, "world history" as a concept is easily overused and misused. For example, I chose a food history book called *Salt: A World History* for my book review project. Reading it, I found out that although it claimed to be a world history book, the content and structure were extremely Eurocentric. While stories from Asia and Africa only appeared at the beginning and the end as wild entertainment, Native Americans and South America were completely absent from the storytelling. Hence, I began to wonder: if an author talks about a wide collection of facts around the world while maintaining an unmistakably Eurocentric perspective, could their narrative still be included

in world history? And considering the fact that the book is a non-academic reading, should

the critic be equally strict about its historical attitude? However, after pondering these questions for a long time, I come to realize that precisely because of these best sellers' popularity and impact on the public, writers should be more careful in avoiding Eurocentrism in their writings. And only if they integrate a real world perspective with the consciousness and respect to include multiple voices into their writing, should their work be allowed to be called world history books. Otherwise, the public would be confused and even misled by a distorted representation of world history. As a result, from this special case, I have come to understand how important it is to remain critical of any narrative titled world history, and to be aware that real world history stories may not point it out directly.

To conclude, after three months of intense reading and discussion, this course is coming to an end. I am grateful for my teacher, peers, and all those authors of our readings. They all have pushed me to understand the real nature of world history, as well as this complicated world. And world history, in my opinion, has become much more than a discipline: it is an attitude, a horizon-broadening adventure and still, a miracle that attracts you to follow me until the last word.

Raphael NGAI

I am delighted about having completed HIST 3029, which has been a challenging and fruitful learning experience. At the end of the course, I would like to discuss my new understanding of world history, evaluate it as an academic field, and review what I learned in the book review project and in the course activities.

After studying world history for several months, I find my previous definition and understanding of world history too simplistic. Before the course, I thought world history was just a macro-scale history which sees human beings as a single unit. I assumed it examined humans' general activities by simply drawing peoples of different continents together and identifying the similarities among them.

However, after the course, I find world history is more about the differences. Though we did indeed look into these general movements and phenomena of human society like diseases and war, we always found differences within these similarities. For instance, both Europe and China had their own long-established medical system. However, when facing the 1918 Spanish Influenza, they responded differently. Their medical technology, knowledge and attitudes to diseases were different. Western doctors realized the seriousness of the disease and acted immediately while the Chinese authorities underestimated the situation and responded slowly, due to the recurrence of similar cases of flu in the past. Different people will respond and act very differently to the same event. The differences in the interaction between Easterners and Westerners make world history interesting.

Throughout the course, I have been asking myself whether or not the present world is western-dominated. I do not think it is: every part of the world, be it Turkey, Egypt, or

Malaysia, has always tried to preserve their own cultures. While some fear the Americanization of the world, we have learned that McDonalds, for example, was assimilated into the local culture of Hong Kong. Non-western countries exert their influence by participating in international political, economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation through the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the Olympic Games. Asian and Arab countries also form regional blocs to maintain closer cooperation. Each part of the world plays its own role, the world is clearly not dominated by the West.

World history is useful as a new approach to studying history. Historians are not bound by nation, country or race and can adopt a broader perspective when analyzing problems. However, world history often involves many issues, which are interrelated to each other. For example, my book review project for *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* examines world population history. It is difficult for historians to explore population problems without touching on issues such as war, diseases, or food. Apart from these themes, I also deal with religion and freedom in my project, which makes it very complicated.

The assigned readings and discussion seminars have changed my views on world history. Apart from big countries on the European, American, Asian and African continents, we also discussed many forgotten places. I would never have expected that we would talk about the environmental policies of the islands of St. Vincent and St. Helena. This is fascinating and meaningful. World history is exactly the subject to include every place of the world. During the course, I started to realize the importance of including obscure places and minorities. They represent differences from the majority. Their coexistence with the majority explains how diversified the world is, thus demonstrating the complexity of world history.

In class discussion, we talked about identity quite a bit. This helps me know more about myself: Apart from being a Hongkonger, I also identify myself as a Chinese, an “Easterner,” a man, and a member of human society; I have my own culture, eating habits, religious beliefs, and language. I am witnessing the recent complicated relations between Hongkongers and Mainland Chinese. I review gender problems from a male perspective. I have made experiences in communicating and associating with foreigners. I found my own attitudes and opinions on world history are highly affected by my own identity. I also spent time listening to my classmates and the teacher’s opinions in the discussions. We come from different countries. It was interesting to exchange our thoughts. We found the education system, eating habits, popular culture and national feelings of our own countries very different from each other. Though we sometimes had disagreements on certain issues, we knew to respect each other. Our class looks like a world, involving different voices. Inclusion rather than exclusion of different opinions fosters our mutual understanding and helps us come up with more excellent ideas.

Through reading, I found world historians have effectively addressed important concepts and ideas to readers. Though the world was not always as highly globalized as it is today, historians have demonstrated connections between different places based on common issues

like war and imperialism. Readers can see interactions between the East and West, colonizers

and colonized, developed and less developed countries, and understand their complicated relations. In addition, most of the issues addressed by world historians are highly related to the present, making them easier for readers to understand. For example, colonial powers realized the problem of deforestation in their colonies and implemented policies to protect the environment; the world today is also facing environmental problems like global warming and extreme climate. World historical issues in this sense help us rethink the present world.

The book review project strengthened my understanding of population issues and the skills to write an academic book review. Writing a good review is much more complicated than I had thought. Apart from reading the book, I had to make other preparations: I read book reviews, presented my project and received comments for improvement. I looked up specific personalities and organizations of world population control in reading processes, which enrich my knowledge of population history. I related other themes discussed in class like religion and environment to population. I analyzed the author's definition and interpretation of population control. I evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the book. The project trained me to write history professionally, offering me a valuable learning experience.

The course completed and concluded my university studies, and brought me far beyond familiar places by looking into Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. My historical understating is no longer limited to Europe, East Asia and America. I have studied countless wars in my three-year history studies, but through this course, I have learned that war becomes a feature of human society because differences and disagreements always exist. War was frequently used by rival groups to solve their conflicts. But I think war will only intensify hostility and perhaps generate more wars. Respect and compromise are much more effective than war to ease conflicts. This will bring harmony, which is the key to world peace.

Through HIST 3029 and the cooperation with *The Middle Ground* journal, I got a taste of transnational history and wrote a book review. I feel that I have entered the academic world and have gained more than I expected in the course. I learnt to think critically and write history professionally. I loved working on population history and other themes of world history. I enjoyed exchanging thoughts with my classmates and teacher in class. I have developed great interest on world history and I find it very useful as a new approach for historical studies. I will definitely continue exploring more on this field after my undergraduate studies.

William WILSON

At the beginning of this course, I wrote that it seemed “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”, and I feel that was a remarkably accurate assessment. Though enjoyably chaotic at times, over a semester I have, together with the class, explored a tremendous variety of topics through a global scope, including disease, food, colonialism, war and more, with each sparking rewarding conversation and debate. Honestly, I have striven previously to

make many of the same transnational connections that were present in our readings; however, what was refreshing was to consume these ways of thinking through a specific academic discourse. Coming into the course with no serious idea of the particular methodologies or techniques employed by world historians, my mind was a blank slate ready to be filled, which is not a situation I often find myself in nowadays.

World history appears to complement, rather than attack, established history in a manner that other new, ‘historical revisionist’ developments in the field seem to do. Perhaps this is because, rather than rewriting the old, world history instead aims to explore the unexplored, and formulate new perspectives as opposed to subverting old ones. For instance, mainstream histories of the British Empire and imperialism could, if anything, be complemented by the investigation of interactions between not just colonisers and the colonised, but also different colonialised groups with each other, or indeed between colonists and those who existed outside typical spheres of influence. This is the power of a globalised perspective; not to force everyone to live the same breathless internationalised lifestyle and share the viewpoints that invariably come with that, but rather to scope out new fields of human knowledge for the benefit of all.

Although some may understandably place world history into the category of ‘globalisation’, I feel that this does the field something of a disservice. The term conjures up a very narrow view of the world, propagated by the IMF and World Bank et al., reliant largely on an economic dissemination of humanity for explanations of events; ‘neoliberalism’ comes to mind. Though I’m sure some historians prefer this approach, and as a student of international business as well as history I can relate to them, my view that this discipline can offer so much more than that has been reinforced throughout this course. Firstly, it has been demonstrated that interactions between people and cultures have been present, and significant, for much longer than the recent past, admittedly something that is fairly obvious. Secondly, and more importantly, the lucid linking of disparate geographical locations, and the people within them, in so many different ways presents a profoundly more expansive and satisfactory exploration of society and progress. Having said that, economic history need not be in conflict with world history; indeed it can provide fascinating insights into the very human interactions that surround the trade of goods and services, without the necessary homogenisation of the people it discusses.

My book review, which is on John M. Headley’s *The Europeanization of the World*, has also forced me to rethink what might have previously remained more nationalistic impulses, and instead partially redrawn my own culture and heritage within a broader guise. His work, stringing together the Renaissance-era mapmaking of Spain, Portugal and Italy, with Christian universalism and Anglo-American parliamentary democracy, is a pleasure to read, and also clearly has contemporary political implications. For me at least, those implications are positive; if Headley is indeed something of a world historian, then world history can be an enjoyable antidote to reports of doom and gloom in the West. Ideas too can transcend national borders in their spread across the globe, and even outlive the physical existence of the societies that created them in the first place. Perhaps far from making history more

confusing, world history has the potential to make the world in general less-so, bridging the gaps between people and nations, and in turn demonstrating instead common and at times unexpected bonds.

As someone who continues to revel in the opportunity to explore the world, forming my own opinions and questioning everything, my introduction to world history has been highly satisfactory. It can be a beautiful experience when everything in life just begins to ‘click’. Despite the inevitable challenges of death and sadness, and along with the many other powerful and varied influences in my existence, this course has undoubtedly played a role in my intellectual and personal growth. On the flipside, as hard as I try, it can still be terribly difficult to maintain knowledge and connection with everything that is going on in the world, both past and present, so it is nice to know that other people are grappling with the same problems. One particularly important aspect of education at institutions such as the University of Hong Kong is the ability to discuss, and at times spar, with students from a variety of cultural and academic backgrounds, which can only serve to improve my comprehension of how others think and feel. Lastly, credit where it is due to Dr. Schneider, who has managed to work through the generally maladroit experience of creating a new course, especially one with so wide a scope, and in doing so kept me and my classmates engaged and intrigued by the field of world history. Thanks to her infectious interest, I severely doubt that this is the end of my study in this field, which seems to so naturally complement my fascination with humanity in general.

Birgit SCHNEIDER (Instructor)

Choosing to teach HIST3029, “Transnational History: A New Approach to the Past” was an easy choice, and after teaching it, I am still as enthusiastic about it as I was at the beginning of the semester, and am excited to teach it again in the future. The breadth, diversity, and complexity of the field make it an incredibly exciting subject to teach, in particular to students who have never before been exposed to it. And this is where the challenge started: the student population. In addition to their different countries of origin—Hong Kong, China, Korea, Britain/Australia—they had immensely different backgrounds and, as it turned out, different reference points and approaches to most anything. In addition to majoring in History, students were or had been studying Business and Comparative Literature, and one was not a history student at all but an English major. To reconcile these different backgrounds and expectations proved more important than I had expected, perhaps precisely because this was such a small class.

I structured the class sessions around assigned readings and student presentations. The readings covered broad topics ranging from imperialism and war to religion, disease, and gender, and were intended to give them an overview of the themes, approaches, and methods of the field; the presentations were related to the book review project. In small steps toward crafting their own book reviews, students evaluated their book of choice for the review, one world history journal, and introduced a draft of their review. Discussion—of presentations

and of assigned journal articles and book chapters—was what we did during class time. Although I always came to class with a set of questions, about the topic itself and about the assigned authors' interpretations, I was also prepared to let my students to go off on tangents when it appeared that they had something to say on the topic's relevance for their own lives. This was the case, for example, when we discussed imperialism, gender, and food. I also found it necessary, sometimes, to explain aspects or connections in order to make clear the relevance of a certain topic, or to provide context that students simply did not know about, although I tried to avoid dominating the discussions.

There are two things that I consider noteworthy about discussing world history texts and topics in retrospect. One concerns the choice of texts: although I had several colleagues' extensive reading lists on hand, and spent considerable time browsing books and journals, world history and not, I found it quite difficult to find texts that were at the same time somewhat authoritative, representing the sub-fields' states, as well as outlining useful case studies (and reasonably engaging ones at that) so as to give an impression of how, specifically, world historians approach questions of war and empire, for example. It does not come as a surprise that I had to combine an article with a good story with a more theoretical one, and I do not blame my students for preferring the ones with the better stories. The other concerns the discussions: in the end, we discussed the topics much more than their world history aspects. Perhaps the topics were, after all, more abstract than much of what they had been reading before, and this may have been their first time to think about global ecological diversity or the ways in which McDonalds has managed to blend in with Hong Kong culture. Perhaps I should have been stricter in guiding the discussions toward world history. Perhaps what we discussed was world history: making sense of global phenomena, though not necessarily in a very historical sense. On the other hand, I believe these discussions have been valuable for the students, and have exposed them to problems and issues that they may not have thought about before; the discussions definitely demonstrated a great diversity of opinions, even among just four students.

Finally it was a big surprise how seriously my students took the East-West dichotomy. While race is an important part of identity in Hong Kong, I would never have thought how readily students resorted to what are ultimately stereotypes about "Asia" and "Europe," "the East" and "the West." Although I always tried to question these notions, I do think I failed to sow the seeds of doubts about them in my students; stereotypes and dichotomies and othering are all very comforting, after all. Complexities are not always helpful. One of my goals when teaching this course again is to make students reconsider the validity and usefulness of the East-West dichotomy, and to realize the complexities of human interaction. This means that I may have to include more readings on non-Western people and topics (and I am aware that I am using the dichotomy, too), and steer discussions more strongly towards a consideration of diversity.

What is still missing, for this particular cohort as well as myself, and possibly the entire discipline, is a coherent and concise definition. My students' understanding of what world history is covers a broad range of things: starting perhaps with "transnational history" (which

is, somewhat unfortunately, the name of this course) as involving simply more than one country; including “big history” as in David Christian’s TED talk; and being characterized by a challenge, or even subversion, of “traditional” history (whatever that is). What I believe they understood, though, is that the histories of disparate places and peoples are connected to each other, and are shaping the present and their identities. World history is more than the sum of national histories; its relevance in a global, interconnected world is undeniable; and to study it means to engage with historical as well as contemporary complexities.