

HIST3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past  
 The University of Hong Kong  
 Semester 1, 2015-16  
 Dr Birgit Schneider

## Second Reflective Essay Assignment

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After one semester of studying World History, I can clearly see the benefits but also some pitfalls in approaching the past through the lens of world history. The book review assignment has provided an ideal ground for me to embark on the work of a world historian, hence meeting my expectations for the course.

Studying World History offers the lens to see linkages that exist beneath and around a singular event. The study of the Contagious Disease Legislation,<sup>1</sup> for example, opened my eyes to more than the impact of the ordinance on a local level. The reading from class by Levine greatly aided this. Apart from looking at the ordinance itself, the progress in the medical field at the time, the relationship Hong Kong local people had with the British and their technology, and the prevailing ideology of modernity among the British were all reflected when examining this topic. This echoes what Schissler said, that “world history conveys an idea of connectedness and exchange between people on local and global levels.”<sup>2</sup> Examining not only the global progress of western medicine, I could also note the “particular habits of the locals” in examining this topic through the eyes of a world historian.<sup>3</sup> Through this study, I understood how world history comprises of an inter-disciplinary and transnational approach which allows for a singular event’s contextualization among many factors existing at the time. I was able to not solely focus on the event itself, but investigate a broader picture of it and note the linkages surrounding and impacting it.

World History also has its limitations in that it may be easy to neglect the local influences in an in-depth fashion. Using the example of the Contagious Disease Ordinance again, one may

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<sup>1</sup> Philippa Levine, *Modernity*, “Medicine and Colonialism: The Contagious Diseases Ordinances in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements,” in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette M. Burton (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> 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 Nuhoglu Soysal (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 237.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, “Medicine and Colonialism,” 39.

be able to see the social and political forces at play while investigating the Contagious Disease Legislation. However, colonialism also brought with it other influences such as education, missionary work and the promotion of women's rights into Hong Kong. These different fields also had an impact on the locals' understanding of the ordinance. While the "colonizer and the colonized led separate and overwhelmingly segregated lives based largely on race," female British missionaries advocated against the legislation.<sup>4</sup> Their belief in the betraying of "Christian precepts through... guilty compromise with slavery" adds another layer of meaning and interpretation into the ordinance. Was the local population supported by the missionaries? How did the emergence and implementation of missionary education play a role in this situation? Did British churches established in Hong Kong advocate for a rebellion against the ordinance? These were neither addressed in the reading nor in our discussion. Local forces, hence, could be easily overlooked in the study of world history as domestic history may only be glanced at, but not explored in an in-depth manner. Being unaware of this could be detrimental as national history can offer insight into the nitty-gritty details of the local level that world history cannot.

At the beginning of the course, I only had an inkling of what world history or transnational history was. The timing of the book review was ideal as it provided the grounds to practice world history on my own. After a semester of lively discussions and applying the lens of world history on various topics, I had the skills and the practice to analyze my own book as a world historian. Although the book was on the chronological evolution of Protestant British missionary activity in various colonies, the elements of world history I identified transcended merely geographical borders. I selected marriage, for example, as an element spurring transnationalism or the creation of world history. It played a big role in creating interconnections between people of different nationalities and missionary societies. As mentioned in my book review, missionaries from France and Scotland were united in marriage, leading to the sharing of resources between two geographically different missionary societies and dramatically impacting the work done in the mission field through their partnerships. Being able to identify the prevalent philosophy in Europe and its impact on the colonies and the missionaries' works was another element I identified as a world historian. As the ideas of progress and civilization became dominant, missionaries began to establish schools to teach English, which furthered the colonizers' interests in trade. Being aware of the inter-disciplinary forces at work, therefore, I was able to grasp the various influences which spurred the Protestant British missionary work. This exercise also strengthened my understanding on the skillset needed to be a world historian. I learnt that world history meant be-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

ing attentive. It meant being observant of factors that are seemingly unrelated to the topic. Hence, I understood the importance of researching events and forces outside of my topic to draw connections to create a broad understanding.

Reflecting upon the various discussions in the course, I realized that my expectations were met. I not only understood world history more as a field of study and its difference from national history. The readings and thought-provoking discussions in class spurred me to think more broadly and transnationally. I was able to draw connections from different classes, such as my understanding on the history of public health, into the discussion about modernity being connected to cleanliness. The book review project gave me the grounds to be an individual world historian. The opportunities provided in the course stretched my thinking and taught me the essentials on investigating the past through a world historian's perspective. All in all, I am extremely glad I stayed in this course and acquired the skills to approach my future studies in History as a world historian.

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### Jacob GOLDMAN

World history is not an easy discipline to define. It is a global history without the focus on nation states and it is a thematic history without a narrow temporal and special scope. World history is massive in its scope, it is transnational in its outlook and it is diverse in its practice. It requires both the reader and the writer to be able to connect disparate events into cohesive histories. In short, world history is the cross-disciplinary study of history on a global scale. As a result

of its difficulty, studying world history during my semester at HKU not only made me a better student, but also a better scholar.

At the beginning of *Transnational History: a new perspective on the past*, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I thought transnational history would simply be a way of looking at history on a larger scale; instead of talking about France, we would talk about the links between Germany and France. I assumed that I could hold my old biases and write the way I always wrote. This was not the case. I was forced to examine the nationalism present in my writing and my ideologies. Every time I spoke in class, I had to be aware of the ‘us vs. them’ mentality present in all of my previous historical reading. Moreover, I had to learn topics as diverse as ecology and war, and put them into the same context – a task which is not easy.

In class I was able to decipher difficult texts and grapple with complex ideas. In the lesson on environmental history, Guha<sup>1</sup> forced me to view national parks through a new colonial lens, and in the lesson about imperialism, I not only enhanced my view of cultural movements, but I also was shown the practical value of a truly transnational approach. It was through discussions and readings like these that I began to understand world history’s inherent worth. Despite being difficult, it frees its practitioner. It allows her to make connections and gain understandings which would otherwise be impossible. I cannot imagine a national historian being able to produce Humphries’<sup>2</sup> enlightening work on the Spanish Influenza: in his work, Humphries examines all of the major theories about the early spread of the Spanish Influenza and, with some additional research and a transnational lens, he is able to present a new theory on the disease’s evolution, which seems almost indisputable to the reader. Because of historians like Guha, I am confident in world historians’ ability to effectively address the issues of our globalizing world. While not all world historians write world history perfectly, and while there is a lot more world history to be written, I am hopeful for the future of the field. Though it was difficult to adapt to this new field of study, the readings and class discussions truly helped to make me a better scholar.

The book review project was perhaps the most helpful part of the class. Not only did it give me a taste of academic book reviews, a form of writing I had never before encountered, but it also allowed me the freedom to explore a topic on my own. The project, which included writing what I thought about the work before I read it, reading other academics’ reviews of it and finally

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<sup>1</sup> Ramachandra Guha, “The Paradox of Global Environmentalism,” *Current History* 99, no. 640 (November 2000): 367-370.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

writing my own review of the work, forced me to spend time analyzing the work. Over three months I was able to read the book multiple times, getting a new impression with every re-read. In reading the academic reviews of the work, in combination with learning about the *Journal of World History*, I learned how to properly analyze a work of world history. Moreover, my choice of book, Patrick Manning's *Migration in World History*, could not have been more beneficial to me. In every reading and every class discussion, his work provided me a background. For instance, during the discussion about war, I could not help but notice that war is yet another pattern in the history of migration. Not only did it give me a better background in global history and a comprehensive knowledge of migration theory, but it also gave me an outline to ground my idea of world history. Moreover, by spending so much time focused on a single book and examining it from every angle, I was able to reflect upon my own writing style and make my writing clearer. Ultimately, the book review project was not only helpful in allowing me to gain knowledge of migration, but it also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the field of world history.

Clearly, world history is not an easy subject. When studying it, one is constantly bombarded by facts, stories and ideas. One must be willing to examine evidence written in multiple languages and gathered using multiple disciplines. One must avoid being dragged down by small details in the mountains of evidence, but one must also provide enough of this evidence to substantiate one's assertions. Despite its difficulties, studying world history is not only a fruitful endeavour, but also an enjoyable one.

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Zahra KAMARUDDIN

Thomas Berger, an American novelist, once said “the art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> Berger’s quote denotes one of the core tenets of World History; questioning preconceived notions. World History as a method of historical inquiry invokes philosophical questions that challenge unquestioned definitions and perspectives. It offers an alternative to traditional approaches of employing ethnocentric and Eurocentric perspectives that have influenced “archetypical narratives of [a specific nation’s development].”<sup>2</sup> These perspectives have in effect shaped these preconceived concepts, created intentionally or unintentionally.

World History is critical of mainstream perception and representation of concepts. Concepts in this context allude to abstract ideas or common experiences that have been encapsulated in a single term with multiple connotations and contested meanings. For me, the discipline examines topics on a conceptual level as it attempts to explicate how concepts are more complex and fluid than we make them out to be. Topics such as imperialism, disease and feminism under World History have demonstrated to me that nothing is binary or fixed.

One of the many influences of the discipline is the Annales School. In the 1940s, the school hoped to unify historical events to produce a universal history paradigm<sup>3</sup> to demonstrate that developments are not linear and to reduce historical inequality across regions.<sup>4</sup> It was also instrumental because it inquired into the artificial and binary distinctions of nineteenth-century concepts.<sup>5</sup>

An example of a dichotomy or binary distinction that arises in World History is that of the ‘East’ and the ‘West.’ This can be linked to European imperialism and Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism. Historians have utilised the terms to depict geographical or cultural differences. We take these distinctions for granted even though they are vague and portray regions monolithically. Another example that comes up under feminism is the notion of ‘[His]tory’ or ‘[Her]story,’ suggesting that women have not been portrayed as the focus of events in historical writing, having

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<sup>1</sup> “Thomas Berger,” Today In Science History, accessed December 4, 2015, [http://todayinsci.com/B/Berger\\_Thomas/BergerThomas-Quotations.htm](http://todayinsci.com/B/Berger_Thomas/BergerThomas-Quotations.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, *What is Global History?* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2008), 6.

<sup>3</sup> B.H. McLean, “Annales D’histoire économique et Sociale (1928—) (The Annales School ),” accessed January 11, 2016, [http://individual.utoronto.ca/bmclean/hermeneutics/braudel\\_suppl/annales\\_school\\_dir.htm](http://individual.utoronto.ca/bmclean/hermeneutics/braudel_suppl/annales_school_dir.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Eric Vanhaute, *World History: An Introduction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 159.

<sup>5</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, “Fernand Braudel, the Annales, and the Mediterranean,” *The Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 4 (1972): 469.

been analysed in submissive or subversive roles. World Historians under this topic examine how we can include women and if 'she' has always been assessed relative to 'he' or if we can have a separate history for women altogether.<sup>6</sup>

World History questions these compartmentalised distinctions, making us aware of our own biases, but also suggesting that we do not see the macro-perspective. Through critical engagement, individuals can see the drawbacks of solely using teleological explanations that oversimplify and dismiss the complexity of concepts. Mapping out convergence and divergence across regions is useful as it marks the change and continuity in concepts. This allows us to see and reflect on how human perception and experiences have changed or continued in relation to these concepts / them over time.

World History with its heuristic method of analysing and reconstructing narratives of the past, usually but not always employs a macro-history approach. This approach creates a wider context by underlining transnational connections. However, transnational connections can also be reflected using small-scale examples that denote how concepts or different forms of exchange, big or small, have impacted human lives. The study of isolated cases can represent World History, if they help us assess transnational connections.<sup>7</sup> A micro- history approach in this sense produces inclusive perspectives and specialised knowledge.

The discipline, irrespective of its approach follows the story of global human interaction and the idea of mobility while also focusing on how we write history. It advocates for a reconciliatory framework; where it seeks to include voices from subalterns to imperialists, encouraging equitable representation and diverse viewpoints. This means that perceptions and connotations of concepts are wide-ranging. With a framework that is comprehensive in terms of space, time and voices, World Historians adopt comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives to analyse concepts. In this regard, it can portray any entity or concept as an agent of social change.

World History is an evolving field, and the evidence used to create interpretations and to deconstruct or reconstruct concepts can be inconclusive because of new information that becomes available or the lack thereof. As an emerging field, it leaves individuals with somewhat open conclusions. In my opinion, it represents a mosaic of historical narratologies, where World Historians

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<sup>6</sup> Judith P. Zinsser, "Women's and Men's World History? Not Yet." *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 311.

<sup>7</sup> University of Cambridge, "World History Workshop: Introduction," accessed January 11· 2016, <http://www.worldhist.group.cam.ac.uk/intro.html>.

are attempting to put different events, concepts and geographical areas together in one unit. Readers are left with open conclusions because the mosaic is far from complete. This is not necessarily disadvantageous because the discipline does not desire to foretell future events of our globalised world. World Historians have their own predictions and conclusions where their conclusions illustrate the evolution of concepts and cultures, while also demonstrating the need for a more universal history.<sup>8</sup> However, they can keep their predications aloof to enable individuals to formulate their own conclusions. As they are experts in more than one discipline or multi-faceted topics, World Historians collaborate to create new perspectives that will allow them to move away from monographic scholarship.<sup>9</sup> New perspectives are created when individuals form their own conclusions, making the discipline unique for its divergent views rather than its theory.<sup>10</sup>

The deconstruction of preconceived concepts and traditional perspectives are prevalent in book reviews and academic journals that attempt to adopt the discipline. For me, a World History book or journal embraces both the comparative and interdisciplinary perspective exhibiting that circumstances are interdependent. These perspectives make the journals in the discipline more inclusive and interactive. This is because closer examination of concepts allows us to perceive greater connectedness with one another and related topics. Furthermore, assessing book reviews and journals from the 1950s to the 2000s can help one better understand how the analysis of concepts and topics have changed under the discipline. The publication of articles that deconstruct binary terms also produces new scholarship, which is beneficial for personal edification and helps historians build novel connections.

Overall, *Transnational History: A New Perspective On The Past*, has made me appreciate what World History is trying to accomplish because there is a necessity to connect disciplines and topics, but also to understand how historical narratologies and preconceived concepts were constructed in the first place.

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<sup>8</sup> Zinsser, "Women's and Men's World History? Not Yet," 311.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Northrop, *A Companion to World History* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 139.

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### Eric LAU Fai Ching

After all, I have completed the course HIST3129, Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past. Throughout the semester, I have familiarized myself with world history through reading, discussing, writing, and reviewing a book. I remember the first impression of world history to me was "special and challenging" because of its multi-layered, large-scale approach, as I wrote in my first reflective essay. However, I now find this description too simplistic. World history is much more complicated in fact. In the following I would like to first address my impression of world history after this semester, and then I will comment on the book review project and the course.

First of all, I now realize that world history is a challenging field of study not simply because of its adoption of multi-layered and large-scale approach, but its ambiguity. The vagueness of the definition of world history is the largest obstacle for anyone who wants to study world his-

tory. “Are they writing world history?” is the most common question that I have been asked throughout the semester. We discussed whether, and how, the readings were world history. Even in my book review project, I was asked to determine whether the author writes world history. After a semester of studying world history, I cannot clearly tell any common feature of world history works. The reason of this ambiguity is probably the relatively few constraints of writing world history. One example may be the weekly assigned readings which had diverse topics and approaches. World historians write about many topics in many ways they see fit. This flexibility, in my opinion, is both the strength and weakness of doing world history. It allows world historians to write about whatever they want, as long as it is conducted on a global level or related to the world as a whole. They can write about political topics such as imperialism; social issues such as the environment, or gender. However, one may also find the diversity of the research very confusing when first studying world history. On some occasions, historians may even think they write world history but in fact they are not. One of the examples could be writing the developments of colonialism in different regions separately without drawing any links between them. One may argue that there are also variations in the topics and approaches in other fields of history, but the large temporal and spatial scale of world history amplify this problem, making it extremely diverse. Nevertheless, it can also train our critical thinking because we have to always bear in mind that world history is not so clearly defined. We need to be careful when we are reading so-called “world history” works and reflect on whether or not they really constitute world history.

Generally speaking, this course was really enjoyable. It introduced world history as a field of study to me through readings and class discussion. What I found most valuable was the class discussions, which raised a lot of questions such as about the East-West dichotomy and the way of doing history (i.e. who or what should we pay attention to? What does the existing narrative of history lack?). These questions have inspired me a lot. They hint at new perspectives in history. Besides, the course asked us to introduce different academic journals and to write a book review. These two assignments have trained me to write and think both professionally and critically. The publication of the book review makes me nervous and excited because it is my first time to publish in an academic journal. I really hope that others will find my work enjoyable and useful.

The major component of the course, the book review project, has enhanced my knowledge about energy history and shown me how a world history book can be written. The book that I chose is Alfred W. Crosby’s *Children of the Sun: A History of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite for Energy*. This book traces energy development since Paleolithic era. It introduces

different kinds of energy sources and links the development of energy to the development of the civilizations. This book review is valuable to me because the book really shapes my understanding of world history writing. In addition to energy history, the book also tries to explain how people are much more connected through looking at the products of energy development such as transportation and the telegraph, for example. Besides, it also shows how world history can be interdisciplinary. Before reading the book, I thought this interdisciplinary nature of world history would inevitably make the writing very difficult to understand since it may involve concepts and jargon from other disciplines. However, Crosby demonstrates how to absorb knowledge from different fields such as physics and archaeology, and then to produce a concise and easy-to-read narrative. This project has also trained me to think critically because I have had to evaluate a book written by a scholar. I had to pay attention to every word and argument he wrote, and had to look up a lot in reference books because Crosby's book was about energy history, about which I knew very little. I also had to make sure everything I praised or criticized had its rationale to make my review reliable. Therefore reviewing a scholarly work was challenging to me.

In short, this course serves as a good introduction to world history, except that the discipline was not so clearly defined in class. The course really inspired me a lot and provided opportunities for me to write professionally and publish. Finally, the book review project has allowed me to learn more about writing world history and energy history; it has also trained me to be more critically minded. World history is indeed a special field of study, which I find quite fascinating. I clearly remembered that my interest in world history started when I noticed the huge similarity of modern civilizations in a game. After this course I thought world history did not merely allow me to understand the world better, but it allowed me to know myself better, too. As I received a hybrid education which taught me about both Chinese and other part of world, I am quite interested in studying the encounters between Chinese society and other societies in world history now, in order to know myself better.

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LEUNG Hui Yin

Having studied world history for a semester, I realize that researching this new field is far more complicated than I expected. There are so many different views on world history with regard to its definition, approach, and geographic and temporal scope. All these ambiguities keep me contemplating whether it is possible to write a "real" world history project matching different schol-

ars' standards. The seminar discussions on whether the assigned readings are world history articles continuously influenced my mind on what world history is. In this reflective essay, I will share some thoughts on the definition of world history, its inherent difficulties, and my gains from the course.

Fundamentally, the loose definition of world history, particularly regarding its geographic scope, is the largest obstacle faced by scholars. The more places and people world history research encompasses, the more ideal it is because it matches the literary meaning of 'world.' A project studying the spread of a particular foreign culture or practice to a single place is by no means world history. For example, one of the course readings, James L. Watson's article about McDonald's in Hong Kong,<sup>1</sup> is more a regional study of Hong Kong culture or a transnational study on the blend of the American and local cultures, because the author still restricts the discussion to Hong Kong. However, I do not mean that world history is simply defined quantitatively by the number of places included. Instead, I think that a world history project has to demonstrate similar and different views in the world towards a single subject: an event, a commodity or an abstract concept. Therefore, Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*,<sup>2</sup> the book I selected for review, is not a world history book although many people recommend it as one. The highly Eurocentric perspective, with an emphasis on Britain, does not apply to Asia. Unlike Britain, many Asian countries grew sugar cane and produced sugar domestically, so sugar might have a very different history in Asia. This should be addressed in a world history research project. In short, world history cannot be restricted to a place; however, it does not have to cover all regions in the world as long as it contrasts different places in terms of thoughts, cultures, developments and so forth.

Due to the diverse knowledge required for researching on world history, I stated in my first reflective essay that world history can draw scholars from different fields to cooperate; however, it seems that I overlooked some practical problems. Judith P. Zinsser's article "Women's and Men's World History? Not Yet"<sup>3</sup> reminds me of the inherent difficulties of doing world history. She mentions that the theoretical and analytical approaches of men's historians always differ from women's. Neither one is perfect. For example, she explains that the approach of men's his-

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<sup>1</sup> 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. Watsons (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 77-109.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Judith P. Zinsser, "Women's and Men's World History? Not Yet," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 309-318, accessed October 28, 2015, doi:10.1353/jowh.2013.0057.

torians might omit women's roles. Therefore it may be hard to come up with an approach that could portray gender in a balanced way. This makes me wonder if the same difficulties are encountered by scholars studying themes other than gender. Can scholars really cooperate, given that they are of different nationalities and professions? Difficult though it is, I am still optimistic that world history will gradually mature as an academic field. By integrating the scattered existing works on various themes and places, world history projects can represent more people, especially those who are often omitted, such as women and the lower classes. More importantly, with more time and effort from scholars, world history can definitely help provide great answers to contemporary issues.

Through writing the book review with a world history perspective, I have met my expectation of enhancing my analytic skills. Doing a book review is more challenging than I assumed. Complete understanding of the book is only a prerequisite but certainly not easy. Since the book was written by an anthropologist, I have had to make utmost efforts in order to comprehend some difficult concepts and theories. Moreover, we do not just comment on the book's content in a review. This is the first time for me to consider the writer's historiography and choice of examples. There is of course a lot of room for improvement in my work; yet, I think that I have really broadened my mind during the entire process of thinking and learning.

Although the book I chose for review is not easy, the working process has given me some insights into the history of academia, that is, the ongoing interaction between scholars. As *Sweetness and Power* was published in 1985, there are many reviews that were published in these past 30 years. It was interesting for me to notice the changes of approach to the book when reading them. For example, it surprised me when I found that some commentators were negative towards the book's interdisciplinary approach which most of us in the class regarded as useful for world history. In the 2000s, there were some comments on the book's limited attention to gender issues, and now I look at the book from a world history perspective (and of course so did some reviewers in the past). In addition to the approaches, it also prompted me to ponder what the difference will be for a non-history scholar to write about the past. For these two reasons, I deeply feel that I have picked up the right book for the review project.

Honestly, I hesitated whether I should take HIST3029 in early September because I was afraid of not being able to comprehend the course materials. However, I am now so delighted to have continued with the course because all the activities—discussion among the teacher and classmates, doing presentations about an academic journal, writing a review of the classic book—

greatly stimulated my mind and provided me with opportunities to engage in the academic field of history. All this knowledge and experience are useful and transferable to my future studies which are definitely not limited to world history.

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### Hannah SHARP

In my previous reflection I discussed my understanding of transnational history as a way of looking at the world with a 'zoomed out' camera lens, allowing us to see past national boundaries and examine the global transfers of people, goods, information and ideas. It is therefore useful in helping us understand humans' development in a more holistic way than can be gleaned from the more mainstream, usually nationalistic, scholarship. This opinion has not changed much throughout the semester but, as this essay will show, the class has changed my perspective on how to approach studying transnational history and its utility. My two main expectations for the course were to learn new skills and to be kept open minded and questioning. I shall therefore also outline how the book review assignment and seminar style of the class enabled these expectations to be met.

I have come to see the study of world-history as like trying to climb mountain. It seems impossible at first, as the mountain is so big that it seems overwhelming. But, as an increasing number of scholars do small studies which are transnational in their approach, they lay down a little more pathway up the mountain of world-history. Other scholars can then look at this work and expand on it, joining up the different strands of research, and extending the existing paths up

the mountain. Over time we thus gain a broader understanding of the history of the world and how humanity has developed. Knowing that it will take a lot of work and collaboration by many scholars, each with different areas of expertise, does not make the mountain any smaller, but it makes the task far less daunting than if we thought one scholar should attempt to climb the whole thing in one go. Thus, this semester I have developed an understanding of the study of world-history as an interdisciplinary, collaborative and ongoing effort which requires hard work, but is worth the effort for the view from the top, i.e., a less reductive or nationalistic understanding of history.

My appreciation of the importance of world-history to the historical discipline has also increased. I previously concluded that it can provide a wider scope for analysis and deeper understanding of historical processes, but through the semester I have noticed more practical ways in which it can also be useful. We noted in class that nationalist histories are often used to build identities and citizenship amongst their students. This prompted me to think that world-history could have a similar impact, encouraging new generations to see themselves as part of an interconnected world, as global citizens. This could lead to a world with less xenophobia, less extremist responses to those who are different, improved understanding and improved security. Furthermore, looking at issues such as the environment and feminism reminded me how the world today is facing issues of a global scale that can best be tackled by cooperation. World-history can therefore bring the important lessons from the historical discipline to our attention and show that we can work together to improve all of our lives.

The class has also given me a new perspective on how to approach scholarly works. Over the course of the semester I was reading with an increasing focus on the semantics of the language used in the texts, the approach of the research, the sources relied upon and the biases of the authors rather than the actual story they were telling. This change was fostered both by the fact that we discussed the texts in detail in class and because I was simultaneously reading book reviews (in preparation for the assignment); therefore, I was more aware of what academic reviewers took note of when reading scholarly texts.

This leads to my next point, that the book review assignment has taught me new and valuable skills. This class has been my first opportunity to practice the important skill of critical reading, as prompted by the nature of the project, which will be useful in all future historical research. I have also been inspired to look at the journals in which articles are published when considering their providence, as this can hint at their underlying aims. For example the approaches of

Roger Des Forges and Robert Tignor to reviewing *The Theft of History* were very different, the former focusing on the texts Goody uses, and the latter on criticising his approach, which could be partly attributed to the fact that they were published in *The Journal of British Studies* and *The Journal of World-history* respectively.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the emphasis on reviews showed me how useful they can be for understanding texts and formulating one's own opinion based on them.

My second expectation for the class was for it to keep me open-minded, which was achieved by the seminar style class. We were encouraged to contribute so I was constantly reassessing my own opinions and ideas in light of the points that other students made. Sometimes I would reform my idea to take their points into account, but in other instances my opinions were formed and nuanced by my opposition to the arguments of others. This questioning atmosphere was also facilitated by Dr. Schneider who followed up our comments with further questions, inspiring us to consider factors that we may not have considered otherwise.

In conclusion, 'Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past' has lived up to its name this semester, changing my perspective on the study of world-history and improving my appreciation of it. The seminars encouraged discussion and exchange of ideas which kept me thinking and re-evaluating my own opinions. The review project has also improved my critical reading and introduced me to the importance of reviews. The class has been engaging and my understanding of world-history has become more nuanced each week, eventually leading me to conclude that, requiring cooperation and dedication amongst many scholars, world-history is a difficult but important field of study.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger des Forges, Review of *The Theft of History*, *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008): 185-187; Robert L. Tignor, Review of *The Theft of History*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 251.

Bobby TAM Chun

After taking this course for a semester, I have new understanding of world history. From the diverse course readings and interactive discussion at class, I have come to realize the usefulness of world history that I did not recognize before the course. I have discovered that many topics and themes in history are applicable to a world history approach. We have looked at histories of the environment, disease, war, gender etc. There are readings and books that approach all these themes with a transnational approach. World history scholarship has been developed in all these areas.

In my opinion, some historical topics are inherently transnational and can only be effectively studied through the world history approach. For instance, environment and disease histories are not just about human societies but are largely related to nature. Nature is not contained by national boundaries which humans imagined. Diseases spread to all places irrespective of national boundaries; environmental problems know no boundaries and often affect larger regions. For other historical topics that I am interested in, for example, cultural history and the history of ideas, it is also more useful to adopt the transnational approach even though cultures and ideologies are product of human societies rather than nature. Cultures and ideologies spread across boundaries throughout history.

After taking this course, I have also discovered that world history is useful to study different agents, voices and social forces that are traditionally under-represented in national history. When we study national history or adopt the national approach to study international affairs, the picture will often be simplified and generalized. In international affairs, nations will often only be represented by their regimes, their armies or the ones in power. As a result, many other voices that are not in power or in the national regime are neglected. Demographic groups that have been downplayed by national histories like youth, women, children, lower classes, or ethnic minorities could be better represented by transnational history. These social groups may even have their own global networks or influences outside the national context. For instance, during the Cold War, the students in the capitalist world or the youth in the Communist world might have a voice very different from the official ideologies of the national regimes under which they lived. Youth had their own global influences on each other which could be barely represented by histories that focus on national regimes.

While I have gained a new understanding of the usefulness of world history through this course, I have also realized the immense difficulties in researching and teaching world history effectively. First of all, vast knowledge is needed to research world history. A researcher cannot simply start from a certain national perspective and include some other information about various parts of the world and call his study world history. To truly carry out world history research, one must devote equal attention to different parts of the world from which the researcher would like to draw global connections. To do so, the researcher needs to have a thorough understanding of multiple contexts. In many cases, the researcher will need to know the language or cultural background of various contexts. It is like putting oneself into multiple shoes in order to achieve a fair and comprehensive judgment.

Despite this difficulty, there are a lot of successful works by world historians that could construct meaningful connections between different parts of the world. For instance, the course reading includes a text on the influenza pandemic in 1918; the author was able to combine sources and data from multiple contexts including China, Europe and Canada in order to formulate a comprehensive argument about the causes of the outbreak of the pandemic.

Historians would sometimes try to tackle this difficulty by working together. There are world history books that are written by a few historians, who each might have expertise towards a particular context. However, when looking at these collaborative works by multiple historians on transnational history, I often discover that the level of collaboration is problematic. Such a collaborative book is often just a summation of histories in various contexts rather than a genuine world history study. The articles on various contexts often lack direct connections; such books could not offer global patterns or interconnections as the central thesis to the readers.

There are other hindrances from collaboration for world history. It is sometimes difficult to choose a perspective to begin with. For instance, for topics like imperialism, trade or globalization, historians may begin with the conventional Western world perspective. This approach will be criticized by historians from other parts of the world as Eurocentric. Some scholars may go as far as criticizing many current theories, concepts and terms in history as products of Eurocentrism and refuse to work within such a framework. However, the influence of historians from the “non-Western” world is still too limited to shift the dominating paradigm, due to language barriers or limited global readership. Western perspective and Eurocentrism continue to dominate in many topics in world history.

Finally, for the book review project, it was my first time to review extensively on a history academic book. I have learnt how to evaluate an academic history book based on its structure, approach, source materials and argumentations comprehensively. Through evaluating the book, I have also realized that multi-disciplinary knowledge is needed to study world history. The global ties and patterns in world history are often not just about politics, which has been emphasized in national histories. Economic, social, cultural, environmental factors often play a significant role in various global historical topics. One must have broad multi-disciplinary knowledge to effectively illustrate all the ties and patterns in world history.

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Even YIN Cuiwen

From barely knowing what world history is to being able to critically evaluate it, I consider my experience in Transnational History to be a fruitful and rewarding one. Throughout this semester, we explored various historical themes and discussed the value and approaches of world history by reading texts, exchanging ideas, and working on the book review project in collaboration with the Middle Ground Journal.<sup>1</sup> In this reflective essay, I will begin with a reflection on the emergence of world history and then illustrate my understanding of problems or difficulties of doing world history. Afterward, I will present my impression on the book review project and my opinion on what is considered good history writing.

The acceleration of globalization in the last twenty years has necessitated the emergence and study of world history. For example, when discussing about environmental history, the phenomenon of growing global tourism and its implications for the global environment draw people's attention to the historical relationship between humans, including indigenous people and tourists, and the natural environment.<sup>2</sup> Issues like global terrorism and global environmental problems have transnational impacts and require collaboration across borders. Inspired by increasingly globalized current affairs, world history provides a new way to examine our past. For instance, by abandoning the nation-centric or bilateral perspective in looking at wars, we can gain a more holistic understanding of the causes and broader impacts of the wars beyond national players.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Middle Ground: World History and Global Studies*. See <http://middlegroundjournal.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "The Paradox of Global Environmentalism," *Current History* 99, no. 640 (November 2000): 368.

<sup>3</sup> Giancarlo Casale, "Global Politics in the 1850s: One Canal, Twenty Thousand Cannibals, and an Ottoman Plot to Rule the World," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 275-276.

Recognizing the significance of world history, we should not overlook the difficulties of doing it, especially its inherent complexity. Such complexity may be derived from the broad coverage of geographic locations where people have very diverse experiences even when facing similar issues.<sup>4</sup> It may also be due to the greater number of players involved and the more complicated relationships between them when the scale of analysis extends under world history.<sup>5</sup> In my view, the meaning behind demonstrating the complexity is to find solutions to tackle it. So far I have come across two types of successful attempts from scholars. Firstly, it is very helpful and even necessary to build on others' works through a multidisciplinary approach and secondary research. Humphries employed a variety of different sources from other disciplines like medical research and military research when examining three theories regarding the origin of the 1918 influenza pandemic.<sup>6</sup> It would have been extremely challenging for a historian to understand these theories on both medicine and military concerning America, China, and France. Secondly, narrowing down the focus is important and essential to make the process of writing a simultaneously large-scale and in-depth analysis manageable. The book featured in my book review relates to cross-cultural encounters in pre-modern times across Eurasia and Africa.<sup>7</sup> The author strategically chooses to focus on religious conversion as one of the major cultural consequences of such encounters. He succeeds in providing an in-depth analysis of a great number of cases and theorizing the patterns of religious conversion. All in all, these two examples demonstrate the complexity of world history due to the transnational nature of the study and that it is possible to cope with such difficulty by using the aforementioned approaches.

While working on the book review project, I recognized the difference between reading a book without specific intention and that of approaching it in the context of writing a book review in world history. To me, there was an obvious contrast in mindset and level of engagement. When I read casually, I usually just extract information and let any thoughts emerge naturally. However, when I read a book for the purpose of reviewing it in the context of world history, my approach went beyond that of casual reading. I gradually adopted an evaluative mindset. I read the content of the book with the intention to understand and critically evaluate the way the author presents information and constructs his or her arguments. I was encouraged to look at the book in a bigger picture and to consider its contribution to the field of cultural studies and world history relative to

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<sup>4</sup> Mark O. Humphries, "Paths of Infection: The First World War and the Origins of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic," *War in History* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> Casale, "Global Politics in the 1850s," : 276-282.

<sup>6</sup> Humphries, "Paths of Infection," : 63-76.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

other scholars' works. All in all, I felt more engaged with the narration and interpretation in the book.

The collaboration with the Journal on the book review not only motivated me to produce better quality work, but also reminded me of the importance of having the audience in mind and writing clearly. The collaboration made my work more meaningful in the sense that my writing will not only be read by the teacher, but also by a much broader range of audience. The task of writing for the general public, a group that may not have much background knowledge on the book and my experience in the course, pushes me to assess my writing critically. For example, I am mindful of seeing whether I have skipped any steps in reasoning or have not provided sufficient elaboration and supporting evidence. The awareness of who my audience is and the attention dedicated to preserving the clarity of writing are essential and beneficial to a great variety of writings.

To me, quality world history writing should offer insightful interpretations on the global past rather than being a mere aggregate of national history or other scholars' works. Capable world history authors abandon geographic or cultural centrism like Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism and include historical examples transcending geographic and cultural boundaries. They are able to present these examples logically, draw connections between them, and interpret them instead of randomly drawing examples together from all over the world, doing so at only a descriptive level or simply piling up other scholars' perspectives. Even faced with the complexity of world history, these authors are capable of synthesizing sources and making sense out of the complexity, rather than merely pointing it out. After all, from whose perspectives should historians approach world history? In my view, world historians should perceive themselves as global citizens, namely, members of the integrated global community so as to reduce national bias and gain more objective views of the past. This is not about forgetting who we are in order to be "objective," but a reminder to be inclusive when examining the past in a globalized world.

Last but not least, world history is not only relevant to world historians, but also to people who care about the progress of human civilizations and human beings as a global community. My journey with world history this semester has gradually shaped my way of thinking, especially when I travel abroad and read world news. For example, when getting contact with other cultures, I now not only have the instinct to compare them with my own and other cultures in the world, but also extend my thinking to the connections between them and how such cultural phenomenon and interconnectedness came into being. While reading news concerning international relations, I

now tend to integrate the historic background to understand the issue better and look beyond the level of national players. Sometimes you can even get some ideas of how things are likely to be like in the future when connecting the current status to the global past. In the end, I believe human beings are going to live in a global community, so why not starting to take a wider angle to look into our past?

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