

CHINA'S HISTORY AND WORLD HISTORY

BRIDGING WORLD HISTORY

By Linda Walton

CHINA'S PLACE IN WORLD HISTORY IS UNQUESTIONABLY AN IMPORTANT ONE.¹ As Richard von Glahn has aptly described it, "China looms over world history like the proverbial eight-hundred-pound gorilla." But its place, however weighty, is not unproblematic. In most world history textbooks, China stands out from other parts of the world in comparison to Europe.² The longevity and sophistication of Chinese civilization make it the equal or better of Europe in implicit competition for first place among world civilizations, at least until the nineteenth century. Juxtaposing urbanization in Song China (960–1279), for example, alongside the development of towns and cities in medieval Europe, China becomes something like the "best of the non-West" by having cities larger and more sophisticated than contemporary European ones. The pitfall for China (and world) historians is the temptation to use China as the measure for the rest of the world, or as the foil for Europe. How can we achieve a balanced perspective that neither privileges China as the non-West's answer to Europe nor underplays China's place in world history? What about the rest of Asia, and for that matter, Africa and the Americas?

One way to counter what might be called "Sino-Eurocentrism" in world history and simultaneously to illumine aspects of China's past is to consider the role that Chinese history can play in the development of a thematic approach to world history.³ By de-centering China as a civilization, empire, or nation, but making use of Chinese historical experience, thematic approaches to world history can avoid the tendency to position China as a non-Western counterpart to Europe that exacerbates the marginalization of Africa and the Americas.⁴ Sino-Eurocentrism is a relic of world history as Western civilization with add-ons, in which the shape of the narrative is driven by European historical experience. Despite China's brilliant performance according to the terms of this narrative—literary culture, bureau-

cracy, urbanization, invention—China's past is more a reflection of its fit with Europe than a product of its own historical experience. As a more or less unified entity for over 2,000 years, what we call "China" was nonetheless characterized by significant regional, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity that co-existed with political centralization and a cohesive elite culture.⁵ China can be a useful laboratory for world history by virtue of its scale and longevity, which offers broad scope for shaping and pursuing thematic paths. In turn, a world historical perspective is valuable for those who study and teach Chinese history because both the comparisons and the connections deepen our grasp of China's past.

A thematic approach challenges the notion of world history as the giant but flimsy scaffold on which to mount the more familiar narratives of civilizations, empires, and nations. By breaking down the boundaries of those historical configurations, themes can help to open up new vistas and insights that transcend imperial and national borders, while at the same time narrowing the focus so that world history becomes manageable. There are two principal modes of thematic analysis in world history: one makes comparisons across societies, such as family, and one focuses on connections or patterns of interaction, such as migration or long-distance trade. Thinking through Chinese history from both kinds of thematic perspective can delineate more sharply the "pattern of the Chinese past" and help to crystallize themes in world history.

A NEW MULTIMEDIA WORLD HISTORY PROJECT OFFERS A WAY of exploring the relationship between China's history and world history and illustrating how a thematic approach can work for both. Funded by the Annenberg Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History* launched in January 2005 and is slated to have a ten-year lifetime.⁶ It includes twenty-six units, each with a thirty-minute video, accompanying online text, readings,

visual archives, and classroom activities. The online material supports and expands the information presented in the video, which necessarily compresses a great deal of material to fit the video format. Designed for a two-semester course, covering one unit per week of thirteen-week semesters, the content of *Bridging World History* was developed by a team of world historians and teachers to reflect current scholarship on important themes in world history.⁷ The twenty-six units follow a broadly chronological sequence, after the first two introductory units address basic historiographical issues. There is also an interactive web component, the "World History Traveler," that encourages students (and teachers) to build their own world history narratives by navigating across thematic "pathways" and intersecting "bridges." Created as a resource for teachers faced with the daunting task of teaching world history, *Bridging World History* models a thematic approach using case studies from different parts of the world for each unit. Through its integration of Chinese history into world history, *Bridging World History* can also be a valuable resource for teaching Chinese history.

CHINA IS THE PRINCIPAL CASE STUDY for the unit dealing with the creation of political order, illustrating the processes of centralization that resulted in the unification of the Chinese empire in the third century BCE. The Chinese historical record provides a rich basis for comparison with other parts of the world where political centralization stopped short of empire. In turn, the emergence of a dominant culture we call "Confucian" in Han China, and the relationship between this culture and the expansion of a bureaucratic empire, can be illuminated by comparison with Mayan kingdoms, which shared a common culture never used as the basis for a centralized empire. What light can this shed on the sublimation of diverse cultures during the Han and the homogenization of culture that took place along with the growth of empire? We tend to take for granted what

might be called the “imperial imperative”: that centralization and unification are desirable and that our task is to explain the process, not to question it nor to imagine alternatives. In this instance, placing Chinese history in a comparative thematic world history context can stimulate new ways of thinking about the creation and consolidation of the Chinese empire, and particularly the relationship between political and cultural change. Thanks to archaeological finds that complement and expand the testimony of early texts, we know a great deal, for example, about material culture, religion, and literature in the state of Chu that was appropriated and submerged in the consolidation of the Han empire.⁸ Thematic comparison of different modes of political order opens up the story of the consolidation of the Han

empire to consideration of Chu and other areas of distinctive cultures as more than subsets of Han imperial order.

Another example of a comparative theme is that of the family. Although world historical studies have generally not been attentive to social history, the history of the family is gradually beginning to draw the attention of world historians.⁹ Historians of China are compelled to deal with family because of its centrality to Chinese society and culture. By putting the Chinese family in world historical perspective, the importance of family in China becomes less idiosyncratic and more part of a shared human past and a universal (though richly diverse) historical experience. In the *Bridging World History* unit on “Family and Household,” China—not surprisingly—is one of three case studies, focusing on not only the role of Confucianism in shaping family life but also the gap between Confucian ideals and social practice among Chinese families in the past. Confucianism’s influence on family life is then compared with both Islam and Christianity in prescribing ideals for family and household.

China’s early commercial revolution during the Song is used as a case study in the *Bridging World History* unit on “Early Economies” to illustrate economic growth in pre-modern economies. The Song economic

revolution is compared with manorial economies in medieval England and Japan and with the Incan tribute economy that functioned without merchants or markets. This relatively synchronic (with the exception of the somewhat later Incan case study) comparative thematic treatment demonstrates China’s economic precocity without relying on a comparison with Europe.

Other units in *Bridging World History* focus on the connections mode of thematic world history. “Connections Across Land” treats highways of trade and cultural exchange through three case studies. In one, the Silk Roads are compared with trans-Saharan caravan routes known as the Gold Roads and the trading network in the Americas called the Turquoise Roads. By comparing the Silk, Gold, and Turquoise Roads, Eurasian connections—including the Han and Tang capital, Chang’an, as the terminus of the Silk Roads—are placed in a world historical context that highlights the similarities of interdependent commercial and cultural exchange, along with the diversity of commodities and religions that traversed these routes on three continents in different times.

“Connections Across Water” is a parallel unit in *Bridging World History* that focuses on the maritime equivalents of the Silk,

Gold, and Turquoise Roads. One of the case studies examines the Indian Ocean maritime world, which incorporates China as one participant and focuses on the famous early fifteenth-century voyages of the Ming Dynasty Muslim admiral Zheng He. As in “Connections Across Land,” the thematic mode here is connections, but the theme is illustrated through comparison of three sets of maritime connections. Chinese ships plied the Indian Ocean, both before and after Zheng He, but they were neither alone nor the most numerous, taking their place alongside fleets of Arab, African, Indian, and Indonesian vessels. One could in fact argue that Zheng He’s voyages draw more attention from world historians than from historians of China, and that their significance lies more in world history than in Chinese history.

The unit on “Early Empires” compares the creation, organization, environment, and technologies of the Mongol, Mali, and Incan empires. China is brought into the world historical realm as part of the Mongol empire, even though the Chinese empire could equally well work as a case study. “Global Commodities” traces world trade in silver to its Chinese connections, and “Food, Demographics, and Culture” treats both the tea trade and the introduction of crops from the Americas in relation to demographic and

The screenshot shows the website interface for Unit 13: Family and Household. On the left, there are navigation links for 'UNIT 13 RESOURCES' (Unit Home, Unit Content Overview, Readings, References & Sources, Unit Audio Glossary, Related Units) and 'VIDEO SEGMENTS' (Confucian Views of Family and Household in China, The Early Islamic Family and Household, The European Family and Household from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Europe). Below these are 'DOWNLOAD MATERIALS' (Online Text (PDF), Activities (PDF), Video Transcript (PDF)) and a 'View the Video Online' button. The main content area features the unit title, a descriptive paragraph, a 'Read unit content overview' link, and a 'VIDEO SEGMENTS' section with two video thumbnails: 'Confucian Views of Family and Household in China' and 'The Early Islamic Family and Household'. A 'Perspectives on' section features a portrait of Jerry H. Bentley and a 'hear audio clip' link. On the right, a video player is embedded, showing a scene from a video segment. The player interface includes a progress bar, volume control, and navigation buttons. The website header includes 'Home', 'FAQ', 'Channel Info', 'View Programs', 'Buy Videos', 'Workshops & Courses', and a search bar. The footer includes '©1997–2005 Annenberg Media.'

Screen capture of Unit 13: Family and Household, with the video segment playing in the right, bottom corner.

cultural changes in China. In both units, China is a case study framed within the broader thematic focus of the unit. "Rethinking the Rise of the West" has China at the center, since debates about the rise of the West have focused on China as the primary comparator with Europe. Moving into more recent history, in "People Shape the World" Mao Zedong is one of the three case studies, juxtaposed with the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Argentinian women, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Finally, the last unit on "Globalization and World History" uses the Chinese diaspora as a case study to illustrate not only the historical forces of economic dislocation and labor migration in the creation of diasporas, but also the complexities of transnational identities in the contemporary world. Globalization here is treated in terms of concrete historical experience as it shapes human identities, and the Chinese diaspora is framed within world historical patterns.

Clearly, China has a large presence in this thematic series, but its role is illustrative of world historical themes rather than set apart or juxtaposed with Europe. Integrating China into world history in this way helps to break down the inevitable reification of China as empire and nation and to historicize the meaning of these terms. In other words, "empire" and "nation" are not simply frameworks through which we view Chinese history but are themselves objects of analytical investigation. One example of how to historicize China is to consider the early notion of *zhongguo* ("central kingdom") in contrast to *tianxia* ("all under Heaven"), the inhabited, civilized world. Beginning with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), and for the China field, Prasenjit Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (1995), the idea that the nation is a historical object has become commonplace. This point is particularly important for China because of the intensity and duration of the struggle for modernity, and the domination of modern historiography by the revolutionary experience. "China" can mean the modern nation, the civilization of the "Great Tradition," or the dominant regional power in East Asia. A further example of the need to historicize China and the Chinese people is the way of referring to the ethnic identity of

**A video course for high school and college teachers;
26 half-hour video programs,
course guide, and Web site**

Bridging World History is a multimedia course for secondary school and college teachers that looks at global patterns through time—seeing history as an integrated whole. Topics are studied in a general chronological order, but each is examined through a thematic lens, showing how people and societies experience both integration and difference. The course consists of 26 units (half-hour video, interactive Web activities, and print materials) that can be explored at either introductory levels or as more advanced study. The course videos feature interviews with leading world history textbook authors and nationally known historians. The Web site includes an archive of over 1,000 primary source documents and artifacts, journal articles from the *Journal of World History* and other publications, and a thematic interactive activity on interrelationships across time and place.

Source: Oregon Public Broadcasting / The Annenberg Foundation, Annenberg Teacher Resources, <http://www.learner.org/resources/series197.html>, 2004.

modern Chinese people as Han Chinese. This is a construction of twentieth century political discourse, but the name derives from the early and long-lived dynasty that produced Confucianism and other hallmarks of what it means to be culturally—and now in the contemporary world, ethnically—Chinese. Terms for both China and the Chinese people have multiple meanings and references that need to be understood in particular historical contexts, and embedding Chinese history in world history through a thematic approach helps remind us to do this.

China's longevity and deep historical record offer an important corrective (when used well) to criticisms that world history is really a Western project rooted in the US and to a lesser degree in Europe, and that world history only acquired legitimacy in recent times in order to explain globalization and the dominance of Euro-Americans in the postwar world. That, of course, is changing. As China assumes an ever greater role as a global power, it seems prudent to end by reiterating a cautionary note about the pitfalls of Sino-Eurocentrism in world history, both because it misrepresents Chinese

history and because it reinforces outdated views of world history shaped by European historical experience. ■

NOTES

1. See, for example, the conclusion of Valerie Hansen's essay on "China in World History, 300–1500 CE," *Education about Asia* 10.3 (Winter, 2005): 7.
2. This tends to be true irrespective of whether or not there is a China scholar on the textbook author team.
3. I originally developed some of the ideas presented here as a participant in a roundtable on "China Historians as World Historians," organized by Patricia Ebrey at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in San Francisco. I thank her and the other participants for stimulating me to clarify some of my own thoughts on the topic. I also thank Mary Hammond Bernson for her suggestion to write up my comments for this journal.
4. Both Benjamin Ellman and Richard von Glahn raised ideas along these lines as participants in the 2006 AAS roundtable.
5. Charles Holcombe's *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.-A.D. 907* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001) makes the case for China as a diverse and pluralistic culture from around 1000 BCE to the third century.
6. <http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/> Ten years is the span of time that Annenberg has committed to maintaining the Web site. The video/DVD portion of the project, of course, can be purchased and used beyond this timeframe. The online text and visual archive (including maps) can be downloaded and saved or printed for use at any time.
7. Candice Goucher and I were lead scholars, with Jerry Bentley and Heidi Roupp as core advisors. Other members of the advisory board included: Linda Black, Richard Bulliet, Alfred Crosby, Ross Dunn, Deborah Smith Johnston, Ane Lintvedt, Pat Manning, William McNeill, Gary Nash, Peter Winn, and Anand Yang.
8. For a recent comprehensive reference to Chu studies, see Constance A. Cook and John S. Major, eds., *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
9. An excellent effort to develop family history as a world historical theme is Ann B. Waltner and Mary Jo Maynes, "Family History as World History," in Bonnie G. Smith, ed., *Women's History in Global Perspective, Volume 1* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press and American Historical Association, 2004), 48–91.

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