Editor's Note: A syllabus for the course described in this article is available in the online supplements for this issue.

Teaching Multiple Asias

Confessions of a Europeanist Teaching World History

By Alexander Maxwell

History provides context. Today's students are growing up in a world where political crises on other continents affect their lives. Tomorrow's citizens will need an ever-broader array of background knowledge to understand the world around them. History teachers have an opportunity and obligation to provide their students with the context necessary to understand the news, interact with people from other cultures, and thrive in a globalized world.

Providing students with cultural literacy on a global scale is a challenging task. The world is large and complex; no history course can aspire to meaningfully discuss every country in the world. Furthermore, no instructor can claim to master every country's history. Indeed, history is, generally speaking, a discipline of case study specialists. While a course on the politics of revolutions would be normal in a department of political science, historians would generally prefer to consider the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution in separate courses respectively taught by experts in French, Soviet, or Chinese history. The emphasis on particular contexts is one of the field of history's strengths.

Teaching world history thus poses interesting professional challenges. How can historians, inevitably more familiar with some parts of the world than others, cover those regions in which their expertise is weakest? Instructors inevitably play to their strengths, but emphasizing one's region of expertise leads to unbalanced course coverage.

The tendency to dwell on one's own specialization seems particularly problematic for Europeanists teaching world history. Advocates of world history debate many things, but generally concur that world history courses should not be "Eurocentric."[1] The critique of Eurocentrism is generally well-taken; few scholars would advocate Eurocentrism as a pedagogical ideal. Rejecting Eurocentrism, however, is not in itself a pedagogical strategy. Dipesh Chakrabarty spoke of "provincializing Europe,"[2] but a world history course ought to provincialize all world regions.

Granting that world historians should cover all world regions equally, the sheer volume of material to cover poses new methodological challenges. World historians Jack Zevin and David Gerwin captured the dilemma nicely: "There is just too much to do, too much to cover, too little time . . . too many strange names to learn to pronounce!"[3] Instructors of world history can, however, give their course a nongeographic focus by choosing some organizing theme and then checking it for geographic diversity.

A thematic approach can meaningfully integrate information about different world regions. Instructors who pick a theme that engages their personal curiosity should find their enthusiasm is infectious; those working through a checklist of required course content may find their boredom equally contagious. Instructors who teach according to their interests will find it easier to expand their knowledge when preparing lectures about unfamiliar places. I personally began teaching world history partly because the comparatively ossified narrative of modern Europe survey felt constricting; I found the freedom to select my own theme pedagogically liberating.

The world history survey I teach is aimed at first-year university students. It is team-taught with two instructors. Our research does not overlap; I work mostly on nationalism in Eastern Europe, and my colleague does the economic history of the Atlantic slave trade. While we both have geographically diverse expertise, Asian history pushes us both well beyond our specializations. My colleague and I have such different thematic interests that we did not attempt to find a unified theme. Our course covers a twelve-week semester, so we each have six weeks. Each week in turn has two lectures, which we divide into an opening "overview lecture" with a global narrative, followed by a case study lecture examining how global trends affected one particular place. My colleague devotes each of his weeks to a commodity (e.g., cotton, oil) to explain the Industrial Revolution. My lectures examine political ideologies (e.g., monarchism, communism); my main theme is the rise of nationalism. Two complementary historical narratives let both of us teach our strengths, but we give the course some overall coherence with overlapping case studies. When I discuss communism, for example, the case study lecture considers the Bolsheviks in Central Asia; my colleague's week on cotton uses Uzbekistan as its case study. Our case studies include eighteenth-century Haiti, nineteenth-century Japan, and twentieth-century Iran.

While both the Industrial Revolution and the rise of nationalism have profoundly affected Asia, neither are uniquely or even primarily Asian—both terms were originally coined to describe European history. In general, historians ought to avoid structuring world history narratives around concepts originally developed for European history. Jane Bolgatz and Michael Marino recently found that European models inappropriately informed narratives in world history textbooks: "The rest of the world's history is spun off from European events . . . European history is the tree and when needed, events from other parts of the world are added to the tree as leaves and branches."[4] William Green, to give a concrete example, has criticized the threefold division between "ancient," "medieval," and "modern history," questioning whether the European periodization applies in other parts of the world.[5] After pondering such considerations, however, my colleague and I still think that both the Industrial Revolution and the rise of nationalism apply globally.

My colleague and I have taken pains to highlight non-European content in our respective narratives. My colleague suggests, for example, the Industrial Revolution might actually have begun in Caribbean sugar plantations. My lectures, following influential nationalism theorist Benedict Anderson, similarly argue that the first nationalist revolution took place in the Americas.[6] Nevertheless, we have both found it impossible to avoid some historical narratives in which Europeans play central roles. British industrialists feature prominently in my colleague's lectures; French and Russian revolutionaries feature prominently in mine.

So how does Asian history fit into our course? Three of our five "case study" regions are in Asia, specifically Japan, Iran, and Uzbekistan. The overall course narratives also seek to incorporate Asian content. The "monarchism" week, for example, has a case study lecture on the Spanish empire, but the corresponding overview lecture contrasted India's caste system with China's imperial exams as different forms of social hierarchy. In the "communism" week, overview lectures discussed both China and Indonesia. My colleague's overview lectures variously explored Japanese silver mining, Indian textiles, and Malaysian rubber plantations.

Our dual thematic focus on commodities and ideologies also helps us avoid the widespread narrative trap of world history as a race to global domination. Finn Fuglestad has complained that world history "reads all too often like a culture-civilization championship with the West as the undisputed gold medal winner."[7] Daniel Segal observes that Europeanists

teaching world history sometimes treat China and/or Japan as Europe's "nearest rival," and thus as "a foil for identifying the crucial difference that made 'Europe,' so to speak, 'Europe.'"[8] Our lectures, however, treat "the modern transformation" as a global event rather than a contest with winners and also-rans.[9] Furthermore, our key historical actors are not nations but individuals—mostly inventors and entrepreneurs in my colleague's lectures, mostly intellectuals and revolutionaries in mine.

Every reader of this essay would doubtlessly criticize our syllabus for insufficient coverage of some topic or other. Different scholars have different agendas, and no course has any hope of satisfying everyone. For example, Michael Marmé, a historian of China, has argued that "Sui and early Tang deserve stress in *any survey* of world history" (emphasis added).[10] Given the popularity of courses such as World History since 1500 and Twentieth-Century World, Marmé ought to have qualified his boosterism for the Sui (581 to 618 CE) and Tang (618 to 907 CE). Neither dynasty appears in our course, since neither featured prominently in the Industrial Revolution or the rise of nationalism.

Marmé's case for covering the Sui and Tang, however, shows no serious engagement with the pedagogical choices inherent in world history. World history courses should focus on events of global significance, which could be defined in geographical terms as events that affect multiple world regions. The Tang achievements Marmé declares "particularly noteworthy," however, are local events: the Grand Canal, the urban layout of Changan, and "the glories of Tang high culture" have but marginal significance in India, to say nothing of Africa, Australia, the Americas, or Europe. Marmé also fails to view China in a global context; he draws a bilateral comparison "with conditions in Europe" to argue that "the West was not always 'number one.'"[11] Treating the European West as the unique yardstick of greatness, I suggest, does not imply a provincialized Europe. Why not consider other world regions? Depending on what criteria we use in our historical greatness competition, the Tang might rank behind the contemporary Umayyads (661 to 750 CE) or Abbasids (750 to 1258).

Area studies specialists, too, often forget that designing world history courses requires judgment calls. A twelve-week world history course cannot cover everything, and the main issue is not what to include but what to cut. Since the time budget is limited, all content suggestions imply opportunity costs. Why should world history instructors prioritize the Sui or the Tang over, say, the Ashante, the Almoravids, or the Aztecs? Area specialists like compiling lists of things world history instructors ought to cover, but it would probably help more if they suggested things to cut. Rather than urging me to include the Tang, let Marmé tell me why I should omit the Yuan or the Ming.

As a general rule, world history teachers should ignore any content checklist written about a single world region. If instructors of global history treat all world regions equally, accepting a content checklist about Chinese history obliges them to accept equivalent checklists about Africa, Australasia, India, Latin America, and so forth. Peter Stearns, an outspoken advocate of world history, rightly warned that in world history courses "lists of 'must-know' facts can swell, and assessment vehicles can easily deteriorate into memorization checks."[12] No course narrative can hope to retain its coherence in the face of multiple checklists, particularly if checklists are devised without any effort to set priorities across different regions.

Advocates of the "content checklist" approach deserve attention only when proposing a checklist designed for world history in the style of E. D. Hirsch.[13] Hirsch's list, whatever its faults, provides a starting point for discussing what should or should not be covered. Experts with different regional expertise would benefit from an informed discussion about what to prioritize, but area studies specialists hawking partial checklists about their pet regions are simply not helping. Special pleading contributes little to world history teaching and should be dismissed out of hand.

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Analyzing course content by geographic region, however, provides a method of ensuring regional balance even without using checklists. To check the geographic balance of my own course, I count how many of my PowerPoint slides discuss which world regions. The statistics, gathered at the end of the semester, show that our lectures discuss some regions more than others. The "overview/case study" structure inevitably focuses attention disproportionately. We have no case study from sub-Saharan Africa, for example, and that creates a gap. Analyzing our coverage of Asian history, however, requires further discussion of geographic classification.

When analyzing the geographical content of world history lectures, "Asia" makes a poor analytical category. Observing that "linguistically, culturally, historically, politically, and even physiognomically, West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia have very little in common," Phillip West argues that "the terms 'Asia' and 'Orient' can confuse as much as they clarify."[14] West concerns himself primarily with a region he variously describes as the "Pacific Rim," "East Asia," or "the Asia Pacific," but global history courses are equally responsible for the other Asias. My personal statistics divide Asia into five distinct regions that, coincidentally, match West's five regions fairly closely. West and I share the region "Southeast Asia." West's regions "Northeast Asia" and "South Asia" closely resemble my regions "East Asia" and "Indian subcontinent." I also posit the "Middle East," which extends across North Africa and thus treats the Sahara as a more important cultural discontinuity than the Suez Canal. My final region, "the USSR/Greater Russia," which includes Central Asia, similarly disregards the Ural Mountains. Scholars who disapprove of my geographical categories are encouraged to devise alternate taxonomies.

Together, these five "Asian" regions account for 39 percent of our lecture slides, while "Western" history, here defined as the history of Western and Central Europe + North America, accounts for only 28 percent of our course lecture slides. By way of comparison, Bolgatz and Marino, in the study of world history textbooks used in American high schools, found that "between 57 and 62 percent of … chapters, subheadings, and pages are committed to the study of Europe."[15] At first glance, therefore, it seems our course has done a better job of provincializing Europe and including Asian perspectives than some standard high school textbooks.

Our course coverage may seem less impressive, however, when the five "Asias" are disaggregated. "Asia" appears in our course above all as the Middle East, a region that accounts for 19 percent of lecture slides, including the Iranian case study lectures. The USSR and East Asia also provide case study lectures, and respectively account for 8 percent and 7 percent of lecture slides. Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, however, respectively account for only 3 percent and 2 percent of course lectures. Western and Central Europe, meanwhile, account for 21 percent of course lecture slides, more than any other world region.

Unhappy with our relative coverage of China and India, my colleague and I deliberately tried to add extra content the second time we taught the course. We boosted our "East Asia" coverage from 8 percent to 12 percent, but our India content increased only to 3 percent. The next iteration of the course will reduce its "East Asia" content in favor of "Southeast Asia,"

since, for reasons unrelated to regional balance, we plan to substitute our Japanese case study with a case study on Malaysia. Readers may judge these results for themselves.

Yet readers are also invited to collect and ponder analogous statistics about geographic coverage in their own world history courses. What is the geographic balance of your course? You will almost certainly favor some world regions and neglect others. How would you justify your gaps to specialists in the world regions you neglect? Asian experts should also consider the relative coverage of multiple Asias. Do China specialists, for example, adequately cover India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, or Central Asia? Ask yourself if you genuinely find your gaps problematic. If not, why not? If so, what can you do to rectify your imbalances while still maintaining a focus on an overall thematic narrative? Pondering such questions offers a more productive way to guard against subconscious bias than content checklists, with the unrealizable and open-ended obligations they bring. ■

RESOURCES

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NOTES

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15. Bolgatz and Marino.

ALEXANDER MAXWELL is a Senior Lecturer in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science, and International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.