

World into Globe II: The History of History Since the 1990s

Akira Iriye

Harvard University
Department of History

Abstract: This contribution to World into Globe points to some significant changes that have taken place in the study of history. Historians since the 1990s have been keenly interested in global and transnational themes, including economic globalization, migrations, and human rights. The result has been to “de-center” the nation as the key framework for analysis and to propose alternative chronologies to the one that has been determined by developments in the modern West.

Keywords: global history, globalization, non-national history, transnational history

- 1 During the last twenty years or so, there has been a sea change in the way we understand, teach, and write history. The historiographic transformation has been particularly noticeable in my area of specialization, i.e. the history of modern international relations, but I think the same observation would apply more or less to the study of other periods and subjects. We can note this change in the frequency with which the word “global” has come to be used in the titles of books and articles, in the subjects of courses taught, and in academic programs, not just in the United States but elsewhere.
- 2 During 2001-2002 and again 2002-2003, I had the privilege to teach a course together with Bruce Mazlish at Harvard. The course was called “New Global History.” Re-reading the course syllabus, I am struck anew by how many of the assigned readings had “global” in their titles – and also by the fact that virtually all of them appeared in print after the early 1990s. I do not think this was coincidental. Before then, few historians had spoken of or written about global themes, let alone framing their studies in terms of global history. Still rarer had been references to globalization, or to its verb forms, globalizing and globalized. These terms would soon become common place, and today, twenty years later, so many of us use them as a matter of course that some observers are even beginning to predict that sooner or later the popularity of terms like globalization and global history would pass.
- 3 I do not think so, and the reason is quite obvious. Whatever we call the phenomenon, the cross-border, transnational connections among nations and peoples – economic, social, cultural – are not going to go away but will continue in intensity. My wife and I were in Tokyo this March, when the great earthquake and tsunami devastated northeastern Japan, accompanied with a catastrophic series of disasters at the nuclear power plant very near the epicenter. If nothing else, these disasters brought to mind how interconnected the globe had become. News about them was instantly transmitted to the rest of the world, from which so many expressions of sympathy and solidarity poured in. Over 140 countries sent their assistance within a couple of weeks, ranging from military and medical personnel from Europe, North America, Israel, China, South Korea, and others to small sums of money donated by ordinary people in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. In addition, the nuclear radioactivity crisis was perceived as a global threat that confronted the entire world as countries and people everywhere contemplated the future of nuclear energy, not to mention nuclear weapons. A global approach is the only appropriate way to comprehend all such phenomena. And I think historians today are in a much better position to contribute to such understanding because of the historiographic revolution

of the last twenty years.

- 4 Global history itself, however, is not of recent origin. As Bruce Mazlish has noted time and again, global history has always existed, but, on the other hand, the study of the subject is still in its infancy. This gap between history, on one hand, and historiography, on the other, is very much on my mind when I discuss the history of history, that is, the evolution of the discipline of history in the recent decades. For instance, technological and economic globalization has existed for a long time, and most historians would agree that we must at least go back to the middle of the nineteenth century to locate its origins. Nevertheless, historians did not use the term “globalization” in discussing such a phenomenon till the 1990s. Even more extreme is the case of transnational history, a term that some historians use interchangeably or in connection with global history. Transnational encounters and connections go back to the ancient Silk Road and even beyond, but the study of such phenomena was not put in the framework of transnational history till very recently. Why it took historians so long to conceptualize the past in terms of global or transnational history is a very interesting question. In my view, this was fundamentally because historians had, since the founding of the historical scholarship in Europe in the nineteenth century, been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the study of nation states and their interactions with one another in the international arena.
- 5 The privileging of the nation as the key unit of analysis, and of international relations as the basic framework in which to look at the world at a given moment in time, had led to an incomplete understanding of the past, not a full view of how humankind had evolved. It may be said that historians finally caught up with history when they became interested in paying greater attention than their predecessors to non-state actors and transnational phenomena, not just to nation-specific stories or to vicissitudes in interstate affairs. While a small number had been doing so for decades, I think it was only in the 1990s that non-state and transnational themes came to preoccupy a large number of historians all over the world, who began to communicate with one another, thereby constituting a global community of scholars. It may well be that the historical profession had to wait for the emergence of such a community before global history emerged as a new, plausible approach to the past.
- 6 This departure in historiography may be said to be exemplified by certain characteristics. First, and most obviously, national histories have begun to be put in the framework of global history so that, for instance, the history of a single nation such as the United States is no longer treated in isolation, or as unique, but is presented in the context of worldwide developments. Frank Ninkovich, for instance, has published a number of books on U.S. imperialism and anti-imperialism in the framework of globalization.
- 7 Second, non-state actors, such as business enterprises, religious institutions, ethnic groups, non-governmental organizations, and cultural institutions (such as orchestras and ballet troupes) have now become virtually obligatory topics for inclusion in any national or international history writing.
- 8 Third, global themes, most notably globalization but also many others, have become subjects of extensive treatment by historians, not just by sociologists or political scientists. Recently, historians have been paying much attention to such aspects of globalization as migrations, environmental disasters, and human rights. Migration history by scholars like Robin Cohen, Wang Gungwu, Derek Hoerder, and others, is a very good indication of how our understanding of the past is enriched through a focus on transnational phenomena. During the last twenty years or so, there have also appeared impressive studies of the history of the environment, of demography, of natural disasters, and of the cross-border diffusion of music, art, or fashions, phenomena that know no national or regional boundaries. Perhaps one of the most remarkable historiographic achievements since the 1990s has been the publication of monographs on the history of human rights, as well as on the numerous international and transnational organizations that have promoted the cause. Whereas earlier human rights used to be studied as civil rights, in other words, as movements within nations, the trend recently has clearly been more global, the assumption being that to be human is a universal condition and that respect for human rights is grounded on the conception of the unity of humanity.
- 9 These observations lead to the fourth aspect of the globalizing of historical study, namely, the participation of scholars from all over the world in collaborative studies of the past. When several of us put together a *Dictionary of Transnational History* a few years ago, we were able to recruit 350 historians from around the world to contribute their essays. They were willing to go beyond traditional national frameworks and engage in transnational comparisons and discourses on themes ranging from advertising to zero growth. To cite several other instances of global scholarly collaboration, it may be noted that even when a particular country’s past is examined, such work is now frequently undertaken by historians from several countries, not just from the country that is being studied. For instance, a very remarkable feature of the study of U.S. history in the last decades has been the large number of important

monographs published by scholars from Britain, France, Germany, Australia, and other countries. They have put to rest the traditional notion that no foreign scholar could add anything significant to the study of American history. The same would apply, in varying degrees, to the study of any country's history.

- 10 Another interesting example of recent scholarly collaboration is the volume called *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century*, in which historians from various countries examine the emergence of Europe as “a community of shared memory,” the implication being that other parts of the world also have their communities of shared memory and, therefore, that the emergence of the European community is not a unique phenomenon. A book like that reminds one of the efforts being carried out by Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and other Asian historians to explore together the history of cultural interchanges in the region. Some scholars from these countries have also sought to examine the history of Japanese colonialism and imperialism. They have frequently run into political obstacles and nationalistic backlashes, but their continued commitment to transcending mono-national history is one of the most heartening phenomena in the history of history-writing.
- 11 Fifth, the combined effect of these developments has been to obliterate the distinction between the West and the non-West. Modern history used to be understood in the framework of Western history; the conceptual schemes that were widely adopted for tracing the evolution of Western countries, such as modernization, nationalism, and democratization, were then applied to other parts of the world. We used to have certain ideas about the distinction among the medieval, early modern, and modern periods derived from our study of Europe and tried to apply them to non-Western societies. The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries held meaning primarily on the basis of what happened in Europe and North America. We periodized the past in terms of 1789 or 1848 or 1914 and applied such a periodizing scheme to other parts of the world. The history of international relations, to take a familiar example, was almost always understood in the framework of “the rise and fall of the great powers.” Paul Kennedy’s excellent book with that title was published in 1987, just before the age of global history dawned. If that book was among the finest examples of the traditional historiography, the more recent approach may be said to be represented by William and John McNeill’s *The Human Web*, in which the history of the world is presented through cross-national, cross-regional, and cross-civilizational networks. The two approaches could not be more different. If the Kennedy book is still very useful as a survey of modern international relations, today’s teachers and students would recognize that the McNeills’ book needs to be read in conjunction with it.
- 12 The traditional historiography distorts the past by focusing on how the great powers became powerful, how they fought wars, and how they established empires overseas. Nowadays, no study of international affairs, past or present, would be adequate that did not incorporate non-great powers, both in the West and elsewhere, non-state actors as well as states, and a myriad of transnational phenomena – diseases, environmental changes, cultural diffusion and transformation, educational exchanges, and the like – that affect people’s lives as much as, or even more than, great-power rivalries.
- 13 The result of all these historiographic changes has been the de-centering of the great powers from our narrative, historicizing the powerful West rather than treating it as the principal framework in which to understand the history of humankind. A history of the nineteenth century in which the Ottoman Empire and the Qing Empire played significant roles would look rather different from the usual Eurocentric chronology. Instead of a chronology that privileged great-power relations and prioritized “the road to 1914” as the key conceptual framework, we might pay equal attention to the resurgence of Islam or to China’s demographic explosion as equally significant phenomena of the century. Instead of everything pointing to 1914, we might conceive of a global narrative in which 1914 was just one of many turning points that were no less world-shaking, such as the Turkish revolution of 1908, the Mexican revolution of 1910, or the Chinese revolution of 1912. Of course, we do not have to focus on revolutions. A global history that treated inter-racial relations as a central theme, as Marilyn Lake has shown, would have yet another chronology, as would a history of the natural environment in which ecological disasters and energy shortages would be among the key themes, as John McNeill’s work has demonstrated.
- 14 To mention such examples is to indicate how the study of history has grown global and transnational in the last two decades. And no historian has played a greater role in the globalizing of history than Bruce Mazlish. It is to be hoped that those of us who have benefited from his work and been inspired by his vision will not only promote further globalization of the study of history but also join hands in globalizing history itself.

