

Review Article

Gravity, compendia, and the always-postponed escape

A companion to global historical thought

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A global conceptual history of Asia

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We all seem to be in a race to understand what global history is before it goes away. World history did not pose quite the same problem: it was a Rilkean proposition, of *wachsenden Ringen*, bringing more and more and more places into an umbrella narrative (or at least one with conventional spindle and spokes). With global history, however, we are hoping to re-centre the narrative not on a place but on something else – perhaps a comparative theme or a causative model. This tendency unveils the entrapment of global historical consciousness between rejection of Europe-centredness and dependence on concepts and values rooted in Europe’s early modern and modern experience, especially the inherited

epistemology of ‘social science’. The two books reviewed here implicitly and perhaps inevitably rest on this uneasy plateau in ideation of ‘global history’ – critique has become reification, and the fantasy that social science is actually an intellectual technology that can be abstracted from its European and North American substance wears thin with failure to actually make this happen. We still have a need for compendia derived from the observer–observed models of social science, and both books address this need very admirably. They both also raise the question of why the observer’s reference system has not been globally reconstructed, and whether there is hope that observation can be a culturally transcendent, universally applicable art.

In 2000 Dipesh Chakrabarty published his long and eloquent statement questioning the persisting dominance (as he saw it) of the European historical paradigm, but more seriously the lingering European ‘gaze’ on the world outside.¹ He noted that the reflexive assumption that Europe and the European view are absolute, and other perspectives are relative – if I were to rephrase, that European history is the software program and all other histories the data – persists despite our thirty or forty years of strenuous disassembling of European pretensions to ‘absolute theoretical insights’ reaching back to Aristotle, and the

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: post-colonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

exaggerated reports of the deaths of Asian or African philosophies. By now we are all agreed that European history is not the norm, and we all know that European historical philosophy is nothing but that. Nevertheless, Chakrabarty lamented, ‘The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that *we* find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us,” eminently useful in understanding our societies. ... Why cannot we ... return the gaze?’²

Chakrabarty’s lengthy description of the dilemma now applies not only to non-Europeans determined to block or return the gaze, but also to European and North American gazers who are embarrassed by what they are doing but unable to find an alternative. Historians are by necessity intermediaries, and history is by definition not a stream of consciousness. Gazing, narrating, identifying, periodizing – they are all the same. To identify is to objectify; to objectify is to historicize. But is there a reason for all of us to gaze at each other apart from the fact that Europeans and North Americans were comfortable doing it for a few centuries?

Our choices may not be whether or not to perpetuate the gaze, whichever direction it goes, but whether or not to perpetuate the social sciences and history in particular, all of which are rooted in the philosophies, cultural privileges, and imperialisms of Europe, from the Crusades to the First World War. Their internationalization and refocus in the past century have not reconstituted their conceptual roots or disciplinary artifices. ‘Cultural studies’ and other ‘critical’ appendages of the social sciences are not alternatives but by-products. If we plump for continuing the social ‘sciences’, and global history in particular, we will have to determine what global history is beyond a distinctive set of theoretical strategies for decentring existing narratives and generating

new ones. I would urge some briskness, if only because the challenges to global history as a proposition are rising, particularly among a new wave of national-oriented (which is not necessarily to say nationalistically oriented) historians. I am thinking particularly of China and India, but we could insert multiple venues here where historians ask, very reasonably, whether ‘global’ history is not a new arm of imperialism, using European and North American theories to organize the historical content of the rest of the world, discrediting and displacing national histories that are struggling for narrative forms of their own. So long as global history rests on the theories and models of Benjamin, Bergson, Fanon, Foucault, Friedlander, Gramsci, Habermas, Huntington, Marx, Polanyi, Poulet, Wallerstein – you get the idea – the question asked by Asian, African, or Latin American nationally oriented historians (or women from anywhere) will remain a good one.

It is not as if we do not have in English scholarship theoretical constructs – or the ability to create them – of historical change or its meaning from traditions outside Europe. In the case of China we know relatively well the ideas of early modern thinkers such as Wang Fuzhi (1619–92), Gu Yanwu (1613–82), or Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), the last of whom has been the subject of much discussion regarding the degree to which he may have anticipated a discipline of historical inquiry and narrative that shared much with European historiographical concepts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³

2 *Ibid.*, p. 29, emphasis in original.

3 For background on Wang Fuzhi, see Alison Harley Black, *Man and nature in the philosophical thought of Wang Fu-Chih*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1989. For Wang’s putative historiography, see Kathleen Wright, ‘The fusion of horizons: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wang Fu-Chih’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 33, 3, 2000, pp. 345–58; Teng Ssu-yü, ‘Wang Fu-chih’s views on history and historical writing’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 28, 1, 1968, pp. 111–23. On Gu Yanwu, see Willard J. Peterson, ‘The life of Ku

For the Islamic world, some individual thinkers such as Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318) and Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) have soaked up most of the attention, but we have more than adequate treatments for historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴

Yen-wu (1613–1682), *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 28, 1968, pp. 114–56; Paolo Santangelo, ‘Gu Yanwu’s contribution to history: the historian’s method and tasks’, *East and West*, 32, 1–4, 1982, pp. 145–85. A recent essay that has influenced this review is Miranda Brown, ‘Returning the gaze: an experiment in reviving Gu Yanwu (1613–1682)’, *Fragments: interdisciplinary approaches to the study of ancient and medieval pasts*, 1, 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.9772151.0001.006> (consulted 29 November 2016). For Zhang Xuecheng, see David S. Nivison, *The life and thought of Chang Hsiieh-Ch’eng, 1738–1801*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966; Philip J. Ivanhoe, *On ethics and history: essay and letters of Zhang Xuecheng*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009; Susan Mann, ‘“Fuxue” (Women’s learning) by Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801): China’s first history of women’s culture’, *Late Imperial China*, 13, 1, 1992, pp. 40–62. For a criticism of apparent modern appropriation of Zhang, facilitated in part by Yü Ying-shih’s reading of parallels to European historical philosophy into Zhang’s writings, see Wong Young-tsu, ‘Discovery or invention: modern interpretations of Zhang Xuecheng’, *Historiography East and West*, 2, 2003, pp. 178–203. Philip Ivanhoe returned to the issue of whether or not Zhang had conceptualized history as a distinct academic discipline in ‘Historical understanding in China and the West: Zhang, Collingwood and Mink’, *Philosophy of History*, 8, 1, 2014, pp. 78–95.

- 4 On Rashīd al-Dīn, see Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds: cross-cultural exchange in pre-modern Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 133–44; Sheila S. Blair, *A compendium of chronicles: Rashid al-Din’s illustrated history of the world*, London: Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 13; John Andrew Boyle, ‘Rashid al-Din: first world historian’, *Iran*, 9, 1971, pp. 19–26; Dorothea Krawulsky, *The Mongol Ilkhans and their vizier Rashid al-Din*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011, p. 119. For Ibn Khaldūn, see Charles Issawi, *An Arab philosophy of history: selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332–1406)*, London: John Murray, 1950; Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols, 2nd edn, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press for the Bollingen Foundation, 1967; Joseph J. Spengler, ‘Economic thought in Islam: Ibn Khaldun’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 6, 3, 1964, pp. 268–306. On historians

When we use this scholarship it is normally to put it in the context of some projected ‘civilization’ of which it is thought representative, or within the comparative contexts of religion and philosophy. Why do we not use Sima Qian in the same way we use Herodotus (whom, after all, we do not read in Greek, as we do not read Sima Qian in Chinese)? Why do we not use Zhang Xuecheng in the same way we use Kant? Why do we read them as details of whatever object we have conjured to gaze upon, and not as part of the lens that conditions our gaze?

The simple answer is because that is who they are, for now. One of the recent implied challenges to our practice of reading non-European artists of the retrospect is Stephen Frederick Dale’s new study of Ibn Khaldūn, *The orange trees of Marrakesh*.⁵ The chapters elegantly alternate between biography and intellectual history, placing Ibn Khaldūn firmly within a deeply developed local and family history; the book provides an unusually textured positioning of Ibn Khaldūn within Islamic intellectual trends, and makes it very clear that Ibn Khaldūn was a conduit, and more, of Greek and Arabic rationalism and empiricism. Reading Dale is instructive for the historian who reflects that, if Ibn Khaldūn’s work had become well-known in Latin – as did the earlier work of the al-Haytham (Alhazan) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) – Europe would have been provided with some smoother transitions from, say, Roger Bacon to Spinoza, without the

of later periods, see Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and intellectual in the Ottoman empire: the historian Mustafa Âli (1541–1600)*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962; Cornell H. Fleischer and Hakan Karateke, eds., *Historians of the Ottoman empire*, <https://ottomanhistorians.uchicago.edu> (consulted 29 November 2016).

- 5 Stephen Frederick Dale, *The orange trees of Marrakesh: Ibn Khaldun and the science of man*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

prolonged (and, from a global standpoint, odd) hiatus in European inquiry that later gave the impression of an ‘Enlightenment’. Dale refers to Montesquieu as the ‘European Ibn Khaldun’ by which I think he means the great synthesizer of natural and human history, for whom Europe had to wait another three centuries.⁶ In fact, if you want to portray Montesquieu as a poor substitute for Ibn Khaldūn, you will have to stand in line: Dale quotes Toynbee’s well-known assessment of Ibn Khaldūn’s philosophy of history as ‘the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place’.⁷ Nevertheless, Toynbee and the rest of us look at Ibn Khaldūn as an artefact of North African history and of Islamic literary heritage, and of the past (he was not translated into French until 1868). Compare that to the way we experience Gibbon – he’s part of the way you think about history, whether you have read him or not.

Dale makes clear that the principles of early modern European human sciences, from philosophy to economics, had all been adumbrated in Ibn Khaldūn’s premise – an elaboration of Aristotelian and Galenic principles – that the essential material qualities of an entity (including humanity) will determine its interactions with its surroundings and predict the outcome. Humans and nature are locked in a universe of probable but not predetermined transformations, whose progress can be empirically affirmed. Hume, Adam Smith, Durkheim, and others were retracing Ibn Khaldūn’s logic and many of his derivations from classical antecedents. Yet it is clear from Dale’s account that there was no point at which they recovered Ibn Khaldūn as an intellectual source. Evidently, it is not accessibility alone that keeps us

alienated from the historical philosophers outside Europe, even those with whom such a closely parallel discursive framework exists. At this point it does not matter if we know better, and it does not matter whether we identify with imperial history or not. Medieval Europeans read Ibn Rushd because they were fragmented, weak, curious societies eager to absorb any wisdom they could from the more advanced Andalusia and Constantinople. Fifteenth-century Europeans did not read Ibn Khaldūn because they were putting together expansive states that would reconquer the Iberian peninsula, coil together centres of remarkable power in the Netherlands and France, and initiate pervasive religious and ideological wars. Ibn Khaldūn is not a generative influence on our historical consciousness today because fourteenth-century Tunisia was not part of the complexes of power, wealth, and social transformation that would break out in the form of the European empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Making history and seeing history are still coupled in a way we regret but to which we remain captive.

It is not possible magically to escape this coupling’s cumulative gravity, but there are some ways in which we can at least ameliorate our flightlessness. Thinking for a moment longer of Ibn Khaldūn, we may see him working not in parallel to early modern Europeans but as part of a global population being influenced by similar global changes. Expansion of trade and travel routes; the spread of monetized economies; the decline of religious hierarchies; the rise of centralized monarchies, growing urbanization, and literacy: these all produced attitudes that in many or most regions of Eurasia produced materially oriented, naturally modelled philosophies, recasting epistemological trends of the ancient world. In widely separated places, comparable theories were developed of historical change; of the rise and decline of

6 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 261, citing Arnold Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. 3, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 321–8.

political orders; of racial or otherwise genealogically derived identities and their implications for human interaction, languages, and common social forms as material expressions of local essentialisms; of individual rights and responsibilities in newly commercialized and internationalized economies; of the moral destinies of mankind. Ibn Khaldūn, from this perspective, was working not parallel to but in organic connection with figures such as Wang Fuzhi, Desiderius Erasmus, Yi Hwang, Fujiwara Seika, Pierre Bayle, and others. Textbook treatments make such figures from contrasting cultures strangers who may ‘encounter’ one another, not variable manifestations of unified continental or global transformation. We have a lot of work to do to in revealing the global transformative forces that make them all the offspring of a single era of human history. So long as we are shackled to the observer–observed paradigms of the social sciences and their ostensible critics, this might remain out of reach.

How far away we are from such a goal is demonstrated by the two excellent recent books reviewed here. These works are very much within the mode of the global cataloguing that feeds theoretically anchored historiography, but are dutifully inclusive and eschew the giveaway of comparative methods. They are needed in the way that limited eyesight necessitates binoculars. In both cases, ‘global’ in the title is used playfully (I assume) to mean a couple of things at once. Does it mean that they are ‘global’ surveys of historical theory and historiography? Yes. Does it mean that each is a collection of studies of historical traditions confronting the challenges of ‘global’ awareness? Yes. It means whatever. Most of the time, in global history, we are looking for whatever. So that’s fine.

The first book, *A companion to global historical thought*, edited by Prasenjit Duara,

Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori, is divided very roughly between ‘premodern’ and modern, and covers more or less everywhere. Virtually any of the essays should find a place as standard reading in either a historical survey or a historiography course. Each highlights the basic issues in play and stresses the bibliography, and in many cases they are written by premier scholars, among them Duara, Adreas Eckert, Thomas Kierstead, Tarif Khalidi, Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Rosalind O’Hanlon, Michael Pearson, Kenneth Pomeranz, Michael Puett, Bonnie G. Smith, George Steinmetz, Romila Thapar, and Thongchai Winichakul. Like the editors of many ‘companions’, Duara, Murthy, and Sartori are concerned less with theoretical coherence and more with providing a collection of useful, competent (and in this case efficient), independent essays by authoritative writers. The book very successfully supplies this. Their introduction is primarily an obligatory attempt to suggest some underlying kinship among the essays and particularly to explain the volume’s internal organization, which is reasonably enough governed by time – there is a rough division between ‘premodern’ and what most of us would agree is modern – and by a leaning toward the more local as contrasted to the more comparative or theoretical. There are also some predictable comments about the difficulties of figuring out what global history is.

In their real lives, each of the three editors has a strongly theoretical orientation, and in their own contributions to the volume they wax modestly interpretative, though leashed by the short, handy format of the essays. Viren Murthy’s contribution, ‘Critical theories of modernity’, does for the leading theorists of Europe and Japan what Duara has done for empires – reduces them to clear, digestible bits that will be useful to advanced undergraduates, beginning graduate students, or

people who just want to know what this Walter Benjamin is all about. Sartori's essay on 'Hegel, Marx and world history' is in much the same spirit, but excels at nuance without losing pace, a distinct virtue in a volume like this. Duara has been an outstanding interpreter in his career of the issues of contestation in the emergence of nationalist discourses in late nineteenth-century Asia. The tensions not only between nationalists and imperialists but also between traditionalists and modernizers, between parochialists and transnationalists, between the religious and the secular, between classes and genders (a little bit) have all figured in his earlier work. Here, Duara skips to the other side (where he has been in some other work), taking 'Empires and imperialism' as his subject, one that spills awkwardly beyond the small number of pages accorded it. His survey of earlier empires is slightly more interesting than his treatment of later empires, and the essay ends with a few casual questions about whether empires are important and whether they are inevitable. His final comment, 'modern imperialisms while sharing certain impulses with classical empires, are also products of their era – an era formed by an unprecedented collaboration between capitalism and nationalism' (p. 397), suggests without making a big deal about it that imperialism in the modern era may have little or nothing to do with empires (now a growing consensus among historians of the modern era). With this in mind, one regrets that Duara has reified the idea of 'empires' through the ages instead of asking whether empires as we think of them currently actually existed before the eighteenth century, and how long imperialism will be around since empires are now gone. Alas this book is not the venue (and does not pretend to be) for exploring such questions, though Duara has dealt extensively with both the historiography and the conceptual problems of post-imperial imperialism in his work on Manchukuo and on

post-colonial history generally. Readers wanting more in the line of intellectual history rather than summaries of intellectual history will have to follow up these authors in other venues.

A few authors in this volume have overcome the constraints of the genre to provide innovative and intellectually challenging entries. Kierstead's essay on Tokugawa theories of historical narrative and sensibility is intriguing; Ian Harris' on Buddhist time concepts is truly global without being superficial; Pomeranz's essay on environmental history makes progress in initiating conceptual dialogues within the field; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's exploration of 'counter-history' through Judiac narratives destabilizes conventional notions of genre and periodization; Jean-Frederic Schaub's essay includes a trenchant discussion of universality and racialization; Smith limns the curiously thin representation of female presence and narrative in global history generally; Steinmetz's essay on comparative history explores the roots of the genre's tension with historical training and philosophy. Such essays should be required reading in every graduate programme. The more adventurous passages in them underscore the conventionality of the rest of the book, but conventionality in the most attractive sense. This is a volume that will serve the profession very well, whether as a reference work or as assigned reading.

A Global conceptual history of Asia, 1860–1940, edited by Hagen Schulz-Forberg, bears a superficial resemblance, as a multi-author volume with an intellectual history orientation. 'Global' in the title has the same wiggle and rattle as in the title of the Duara, Murthy, and Sartori volume. Here, it encompasses studies of a modern transition in 'Asia' using concepts from global history, and at the same time the studies depict political leaders and intellectuals struggling with

the concept of the 'global' – not usually called as such, but clearly having the import that 'global' has for us today, and clearly connected to the basic processes of globalization – as it touched their societies.

In a superb introduction, Schulz-Forberg strikes a chord relevant to most of what is being done today in global history by identifying nationalism – both as a historical phenomenon and as a basis for narrative – as the perpetually inconvenient monument on the dance floor. 'As we move beyond the nation, the catchphrase of so-called methodological nationalism sticks on the national perspective like a stigma in the social sciences as well as the humanities' (pp. 2–3). But he cautions that, as the national becomes the provincial in the eyes of the global historian, a new problem of 'entitled methodological globalism' emerges. He calls upon global history to 'deliver the goods'. Merely demonstrating connections and comparisons – the transnational, trans-regional, trans-everything mode – is what he calls a 'banality'. He points out that global history is poor in theory, possibly because a large number, if not most, of its participants regard the historical process of globalization as self-evidently the essence of the global narrative; breadth in the field means discovering globalization processes earlier or more broadly than previous global historians have done. Whatever global historical narrative will prove to be, Schulz-Forberg suggests, it will be unlikely to successfully exclude national, regional, and ultimately personal narrative frameworks. In his view, a prerequisite to a truly global theory of narrative would be the establishment of an epistemological structure in which causes and influences can be perceived in their proper relationships of 'equality': for instance, Chinese influences on the European Enlightenment must be perceived, assessed, and narrated by new standards.

He argues that, with the yet unrealized but necessary critical modes, global frameworks should eventually diminish the 'conceptual appropriation' of non-Western histories by global historians (pp. 24–6). As I have suggested above, I don't personally believe that making ourselves aware of the mutualities in cultural exchange will in itself dispel conceptual centrism in historical expression. Schulz-Forberg seems to agree. The sense that global historians will continue to strive for something they cannot truly achieve is strong throughout his essay; what is needed is constant self-scrutiny and epistemological awareness. This is good advice for historians working in any mode, but especially valuable in a genre that is at present suspended between a studiously non-Eurocentric field of vision and a persistent dependency upon theory still informed by European conditions.

As Schulz-Forberg lays out the book's theoretical scope in the introduction, language, narrative, and time perceptions are key targets. With that in mind, the selection of essays makes great sense. Most of them are concerned with the turn-of-the-twentieth-century struggles to synthesize traditional and newer, incoming concepts of social and economic activity, often in contexts of direct imperial domination. For nationalists, the ability to generate concepts as theatres both for individual inclusion and for individual regulation was critical. This often meant amending or abandoning earlier concepts of society as interlocking sets of obligations, or as sets of competing interest groups, or as aphoristic traditions condemning work for profit as antisocial. Nationalism both as a response to external powers and values, and as a means for political transformation, depended upon recrafting inherited concepts (and the attitudes they encouraged) to produce an economy and society able to resist if not overcome hegemonic threats. These

struggles – ideological, social, biographical – dominate the essays, which are otherwise (as indicated in Schulz-Forberg’s theoretical opening) rooted in place: Myoung-Kyu Park’s in Korea, Hailong Tian and Dominic Sachsenmeier’s in China, Klaus Karttunen’s in South Asia, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi’s in Arabic-speaking Ottoman territories, Paula Pannu’s in the Malay Peninsula, Leena Avonius’ in Indonesia, Morakot Jewachinda Meyer’s in Thailand. The studies nicely illustrate Schulz-Forberg’s observation that the struggles against European and North American narrative and semantics are fundamental elements both of the histories observed and of the historians attempting to articulate the observed histories.

The unapologetic focus on Asia is both a strength and a weakness. It speaks to Schulz-Forberg’s admonition that regional and national perspectives cannot be further marginalized from global historical discourse without a cost. Asia is a centred perspective. It is a fruitful one, because in the areas treated there is already a considerable historiography of the semantic and ideological confrontation with modernization and imperialism. But ‘Asia’ is not really a place. These essays as a collection do as much – intentionally or unintentionally – to dismantle an ‘Asian’ narrative object as to generate one. Karttunen’s questions regarding the obstructive role of

social stratification in South Asia, for instance, contrast so strikingly with Park’s discussion of *sahoe* as an organic social concept and with Khuri-Makdisi’s discussion of civilization as a teleological concept in the Ottoman provinces that the reader wonders what they really have in common. At the same time, the examination of urban, commercial elites and their connections with intelligentsia in the Park, Tian, and Meyer essays suggests that, independently of the degree of imperialistic threat or presence, transitions to locally legible ‘modernity’ from the perspective of these sectors is a coherent and to date under-examined story, one that will bind together not only parts of Asia but areas of Africa too.

More than the content of the two books reviewed here, their form joins them to the stubborn centre of Europe-derived social theory. They do not stray outside the observational position or the disciplinary taxonomies that we all recognize as social science. It is possible that it is no longer Chakrabarty’s European ‘absolute’ in relation to non-European ‘relative’, but it is certainly still a matter of being inside the social sciences looking out – no matter where in the world one’s feet are actually placed. The intentions of the editors of both books, I believe, are to provide aids to their fellow conceptual captives still seeking to attain escape velocity.