

Performing the World: Reality and Representation in the Making of World Histor(ies)*

I will take up a question in this discussion that has intruded insistently in my thinking in recent years as I have contemplated the writing and teaching of world history; a question that arises out of the contradictory demands on our conceptualizations of the world of a fluid global situation. This is the question of how best to conceive and organize the spatialities of the world in its historical formations so as to answer to the demands both of a critical historiography and the public/pedagogical functions of history.¹ The question is one that bears more heavily on the pedagogical functions of world history, I think, than on its historiographical premises and implications.

It seems to me that there are two major reasons for the practice of World history. One is historiographical. A world or global perspective makes for better history, first, because it enables the pursuit of historical phenomena and processes across boundaries of all kinds, vastly expanding the spaces available for inquiry and explanation; second, because it opens up historical vision to the proliferation of spatialities and, therefore, temporalities, and allows for a more complex understanding of the processes of history; and, third, in the cognizance of totality that it enforces, it enables a more critical historical consciousness. World history, in other words, is not just a subject-matter, it is also a methodology that at once complements and challenges other ways of doing history.

The other reason, equally important, is to foster among students and the general public (not to speak of many of our fellow-historians) an appreciation of the political, economic and cultural configurations of the world, and of how they came to be, that may be essential to living in a world where differences among humans have acquired unavoidable

* This article is a revised version of an article of the same title first published in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* (fall 2005) and appeared also in the *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), no 4. Both articles were based on the keynote address delivered at the conference "Teaching World History" in Washington D.C., 3-5 March 2005.

1 I use "public pedagogical" several times in the course of this discussion. I do so to indicate that the implications of teaching world history go beyond formal schooling, especially in these days of the proliferation of public media.

visibility in their very entanglement, which is the condition of what I have described elsewhere as Global Modernity. Such appreciation is a necessity not just of teaching in the narrow sense of schooling, but as public pedagogy. And it is profoundly political in its implications.

The contradictory demands presented by the historiographical and the public/pedagogical are most readily apparent in the ways in which we spatialize the past, which will be the focus of this discussion. It is my sense that there is a tendency in most world history writing to take as the point of departure for historical analysis modern conceptions of historical spaces, most prominently nations, civilizations and, on occasion, even cultures. There are good historiographical reasons for doing so. After all, one of the fundamental tasks of history is to find in the past clues to the economic, social, political and cultural formations of the present. Contrary to premature declarations of their impending demise, nations and civilizations still represent the fullest articulations of these formations. "Artifices" of history do not lose their historical significance—the power to shape history—simply because they are demonstrably artifices of history. Civilizations, nations, cultures and continents may all be constructs of modernity. Having been constructed, nevertheless, they have been essential in giving modernity its shape and meaning. The organization of the world around these spatialities is part of our consciousness, as it should be apparent from the considerable effort of imagination it takes even to envisage how the world might look otherwise, which, ultimately, is the task of historical deconstruction.² These spatialities present a problem that needs to be investigated, not dismissed. The goal is to historicize them so as to reveal the spatialities (and the temporalities that go with them) that are suppressed when nations, cultures, civilizations, and continents are rendered into reified subjects of history.

Still, the most compelling reason for such "presentism," if I may describe it as such, is the necessity of meeting the public obligations of history: education in the formation of the world as we know it, and as it is presently organized, which may enable us to better understand its workings and problems. In a recent paper, Jerry Bentley refers to this requirement strongly as a "moral responsibility."³ Whether we conceive of citizenship nationally or globally, some knowledge of where conti-

2 The difficulty is quite apparent in a book such as M. Lewis/K. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, Berkeley 1997 which, having gone through 150 pp. of deconstructing "metageography," ends up with the same configuration of continents and regions!

3 J. H. Bentley, *Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History*, in: *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), no 1, pp. 51-82.

nents and nations are located, how different pasts have produced different social and political structures, or the different value systems we call cultures, traditions or civilizations, and how these continue to shape behavior in all its dimensions is a basic necessity for the responsible conduct of citizenship.

On the other hand, the very reaffirmation of the spaces of nations and civilizations not only serves to legitimate the spaces of contemporary configurations of power, and their projections upon the past, but also, for the same reason, reverses the historical processes that produced those configurations. Spaces implied by nations and civilizations are products, rather than subjects, of complex historical interactions. Greater emphasis on these interactions – and the proliferation of spaces it demands – yields a far more complicated, albeit anarchic, conception of world history.

This perspective, too, is a necessity (if not actually a product) of a world dynamized by phenomena that are increasingly more difficult to contain within conventional political and cultural spaces. And it makes for better, as well as educationally more challenging, history. But it does come at the cost of relegating to the background – philosophically if not historiographically – the spatialities and temporalities that have been informed by the organization of the modern world, the historical consciousness they have fashioned, and the powerful part they have played in the formation of political and cultural identities. There is a “moral responsibility” here, too, but one that calls for a different kind of historical vision, and is informed by a different kind of politics.

This may be one important reason presently that the practice of world history is haunted by questions that refuse to go away in spite of its obvious historiographical and ethical/political promises. There is more than one way to think, write and teach world history, with different historiographical and political premises and implications, and what makes the most sense from one perspective may seem threatening from another. I am most interested here in confronting the historiographical with the public/political consequences of one version of organizing the past: world history organized around nations and civilizations. This approach to world history also foregrounds recognition that the problems of world history are problems of history in general at the present conjuncture. We are all quite familiar with the controversies over “national history standards,” and their entanglement in the so-called “culture wars” in the US. Not only are problems of world history akin to problems of national history, but the one is very much part of the other. If world history may possibly have more profound implications, it is

because it raises questions concerning the very viability, or possibility, of history as we have known it.

Historiographically speaking, what makes world histories based on conventional spatialities of nations or civilizations (or cultures, as they are sometimes described euphemistically), or even world-systems, seem retrograde these days is that these spatialities have become increasingly questionable in the present, raising questions about their deployment in the past. This is by no means to state that they are irrelevant politically, intellectually or historiographically. What is in question is whether they are autonomous subjects of history, or subjects to history themselves, with all the temporal and spatial implications of such subjection. Let me illustrate by referring to some problems in the study of China, Asia and Islam, corresponding respectively to issues of nation, continent and civilization. I will take up issues of world-system analysis in the course of these illustrations. I choose these three because they have been of concern to me in my work, but also because they play a major part in contemporary geopolitics.

The “idea” of China has acquired considerable complexity in recent years, presenting unprecedented challenges in the writing and teaching of Chinese history. The complexity itself is not novel; I derive the term, “idea of China,” from the title of a book by Andrew March, published three decades ago.⁴ China as an imagined entity that has assumed different characteristics over time has been the subject of many a splendid study, from Raymond Dawson’s *The Chinese Chameleon* to Harold Isaacs’ *Scratches on Our Minds*.⁵ The fact that such studies are still called for, and produced, may also alert us to continued resistance among the general public (here, or in China), as well as in scholarship, to viewing China historically.

The present presents its own challenges. The knowledge of changing images of China was not accompanied in the past by any radical questioning of the realities of China, or of being Chinese. Until only a generation ago, the dominant historical paradigm identified China with the boundaries of the so-called “Mainland China,” saw in the unfolding of the past the formation-in its more culturalist guises, articulation – of an identifiable “Chineseness,” and viewed regions and regionalism as legacies to be overcome in the process of nation-building. China in this

4 A. L. March, *The Idea of China: Myth and Theory in Geographic Thought* New York 1974.

5 R. S. Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*, London 1967, and, H. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*, White Plains, NY 1980.

paradigm was not just a nation, it was a civilization, with a “great tradition” continuous from the earliest times to the present, possibly matched only by India – “five-thousand years of civilization,” as the common cliché would have it. It is fair to say that for all their differences otherwise, Chinese and non-Chinese historians shared in this common paradigm.

The culturalism – and the clichés – persist, but they face new challenges, not by phenomena that are necessarily novel in themselves, but by older phenomena that have been given a new kind of recognition. Terms such as “Greater” or “Cultural” China that have become commonplaces of contemporary geopolitics implicitly repudiate the identification of the physical boundaries of “China” or “Chineseness” with the Mainland. Greater China brings in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the populations of Chinese origin in Southeast Asia, while Cultural China is global in scope, and in its reference to a so-called Chinese diaspora that somehow retains a fundamental cultural Chineseness against the very forces of history.⁶ Such a notion of Chineseness carries with it strong racial presuppositions. The new visions of China and Chineseness are at once imperial in spatial pretensions, and deconstructive in their consequences. Spatial expansion of notions of Chineseness brings historical differences into the very interior of the idea of China, calling into question the idea of China as the articulation of a national or civilizational space marked either by a common destiny or a homogeneous culture. The “China Reconstructs” of an earlier day has been transformed in the title of a more recent study into “China Deconstructs,” foregrounding the emergent importance of regional differences against pretensions to national unity.⁷ And this is not just the doing of non-Chinese scholars of China, as the most important challenges to the idea of national or civilizational unity and homogeneity come from Taiwan and Hong Kong, bent on asserting their local identities against Beijing’s imperial ambitions over territories deemed to be “historically” Chinese. Ideologically speaking, however, it seems to me that the more important effect of these new conceptualization of Chinese spaces is in fact the questioning of those historical claims – that the history of China may be grasped in terms of an expansion from the Central Plains outward when it may be exactly

6 Work of this kind has proliferated in recent years. For outstanding examples, see, Tu Wei-ming (ed), *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, Stanford 1991, and Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, Singapore 1992. For “greater China,” see the special issue of *China Quarterly* 136 (December 1993).

7 D. S.G. Goodman/G. Segal, *China Deconstructs: Politics, Trade and Regionalism*, London 1994.

the reverse: that looking from the borderlands in is crucial to understanding the formation of so-called Chinese culture, which may be understood as a unified culture only in the sense of variations on common themes. There is an important recognition here that earlier notions of Chinese culture – textbook as well as popular notions – identified Chinese culture with a textual culture, and textual culture with a national identity as Chinese, meaning mostly the culture of the elite. Such identification has done much to disguise the complexity of Eastern Asian cultural formations that has persisted despite political colonization from imperial centers, which also would suggest that the cultural formations of this region are best grasped in ecumenical terms, rather than by the extension to the past of claims of recent origin, most importantly nationalism.

I do not need to belabor here that similar problems plague the very idea of Asia, which is even more obviously a creation of modern Europeans (even if the term itself goes back to the ancient Greeks or Mesopotamians). It was through Jesuit maps that Chinese of the Ming Dynasty found themselves in Asia, and even that did not matter much until the nineteenth century when knowledge of geographical location appeared as a necessity of political survival for the Qing.⁸ Until the modern period, knowledge of what passed for Asia was knowledge of limited spaces produced by states but also by merchants and travelers. It is fair to say that Marco Polo's Asia was not Ibn Battuta's Asia was not Rabban Sauma's Asia or, going back a millenium in time, Faxian or Xuanzang's Asia.⁹ Whether we speak of premodern world systems or

8 For further discussion, see, A. Dirlik, *Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism*, in: *History and Theory* 35 (1996), 4, pp. 96-118. It was the Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci that introduced "Asia" to Ming thinkers. It is equally interesting that the "idea of Asia" was largely forgotten until it was revived again in the 19th century, this time as a serious geopolitical problem.

9 Chr. Dawson, *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, New York 1955; Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, Columbia, MO 1986; R. E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*; Fa-hsien, *Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*, Whitefish, MT 2004; M. Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu: Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West*, Tokyo 1992. For a Song-Yuan geography, see, Chau Ju-kua, *His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries*, entitled *Chu-fan-chi*, tr. by Fr. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill, Taipei 1970. For the modern, scientific, erasure of alternative mappings, see, Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Honolulu 1994. These mappings, needless to say, are very much entangled in questions of national, class, gender and ethnic power relations.

political states, Asia consisted of localized spaces – either for outsiders or for insiders. Notions of inside and outside are themselves products of modern delineation of spaces; accounts of human motions such as those cited above mark passage from one place to another (kingdoms, cities, Buddhist monasteries, etc), but, as far as I am aware, not one speaks of the crossing of continental boundaries. These spaces were endowed with different significations, moreover, depending on the motives and activities that produced them, so that the same spaces carried multiple meanings – all of them contrasting with the reductionist homogeneity of modern “scientific” mapping.

The multiple “world-systems” Janet Abu-Lughod has identified for 13th Century Eurasia suggests some overarching order of world-systems and their interactions in the delineation of spaces stretching from one end to the other of Eurasia, including large parts of Africa.¹⁰ It is important, however, not to allow the abstract structures suggested by motions of commodities to cover over and erase these other spaces that coexisted with, and created perturbations, within and across the boundaries of world-systems-and contributed to their structuring. It is even more important to underline here that world-systems, conceived in terms of national or civilizational entities such as the Mongol, Arabic, Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires, or Song-Yuan-Ming China, or the kingdoms of the Indian sub-continent, not be allowed to cover over the immense differences within the territories designated by these political entities. Abu-Lughod’s preferred term, significantly is “circuits,” referring to networks and their nodes rather than entire surfaces.¹¹ How these “networks” contributed to the formation of the political entities indicated by those terms is a fundamental question that has priority over the more common practice of describing the networks in terms of the political entities – which is putting the formation before some of the crucial processes that went into its making.

These complexities in the notion of Asia persist to this day, ultimately undermining confidence in the possibility of defining such an entity, or delineating its boundaries. The appearance or re-appearance of a discourse of Asian values since the 1980s, in its identification of those values with values that are at best national or regional in origin, only goes to underline the fragmentedness of the notion of Asia. The idea is to be understood at best as a utopian ideal and, therefore, itself another mode of constructing Asia that has many a hurdle to overcome for its

10 J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World-System A.D. 1250–1350*, New York 1989.

11 *Ibid.*, chapter 11.

realization. On the other hand, the very effort is indicative of the historical reality and significance the idea of Asia has acquired regardless of who initially constructed it, where, and when. I am not referring here only to the persistence of Orientalist notions of Asia in EuroAmerica or the reification of Asia in elite and state ideologies in Asia itself, but to more radical efforts to find "Asian" alternatives to EuroAmerican hegemony that acknowledge the fragmentedness of Asia, and seek on that basis to produce a more dynamic conception that brings unity and difference together dialectically.¹²

The third case I would like to use by way of illustration is Islam. It is not just George Bush, Samuel Huntington, Benjamin Barber, evangelical Christians or fundamentalist Moslems who reify Islam, taking it out of history as a civilization or a deviation from it. In the aftermath of 9/11, a hue and cry went up all over US campuses about the need to find out more about Islam. Those who led the demand were usually liberal scholars, including specialists on Islam, or various Islamic societies. In another example of identifying a "civilization" with a text, the University of North Carolina even made selections from the Koran into a required assignment for the orientation of incoming freshmen, and got sued in the process. Within my immediate circles, everyone wanted to bring an Islam specialist into the faculty; few thought or said anything about an Afghan, a Central Asian, or a Saudi historian who might have something to say about concrete circumstances that produce terrorists: struggles within Islamic societies over political, cultural and social differences, the entanglement of those struggles within a history of imperialism, and resentments bred currently by US colonialism and imperialism, including cultural imperialism, against a modernity dominated by the same powers that have colonized the many worlds of Islam for more than a century, and continue to do so with the complicity of native elites. Peter van der Veer has written of the importance of nationalism in the religious revival in India.¹³ The relationship between nationalism and a civilization conceived in religious terms is also very much at issue here. It is a contradictory relationship, a relationship of unity and opposition, that is further exacerbated by class, gender and ethnic divisions which

12 Editorial, "Problematizing Asia," in: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 1.1(April 2000), pp. 5-6. See, also, Young-seo Baik, *Conceptualizing 'Asia' in [the] Modern Chinese Mind: A Korean Perspective*, in: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 3.2(2002), pp. 277-286.

13 P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley 1994.

are as important in so-called Islamic societies as in others.¹⁴ And yet these problems are routinely ignored in the reification of Islam, when it is clear that such reification no longer serves the purposes, as it might have a millenium earlier, of unifying either a divided world of Islamic societies or their historical "Other," the equally divided world of Christianity.

I do not need to belabor here the historicity of Islam, in the sense both of its temporal transformations and its spatial diversity. Even in Samuel Huntington's delineation of civilizations, Islam stands out for the impossibility of locating it within identifiable boundaries.¹⁵ Aziz Al-Azmeh's *Islams and Modernities*, to cite one outstanding example, has made a cogent case for the diversity both of Islam, and Islamic modernities.¹⁶ Where factionalism is not suppressed by the domination of one or another sect, Islam is divided into competing and conflicting factions, as is quite evident in the tragic case of Iraq, or the competition among sects that has marked the recent Islamic resurgence in Turkey.¹⁷ The evidence of history, once again, seems unable to overcome the weight of established traditions – not traditions of Islam, but traditions of scholarship and popular imagination.

My rehearsal of the historicity, boundary instabilities, and internal differences – if not fragmentations – of nations, civilizations and continents is intended to underline the historiographically problematic nature of world histories organized around such units. These entities are products of efforts to bring political or conceptual order to the world-political and conceptual strategies of containment, sort of to speak. This order is achieved only at the cost of suppressing alternative spatialities and temporalities, however, as well as covering over processes that went into their making. A world history organized around these entities itself inevitably partakes of these same suppressions and cover-ups.

It may not be very surprising that as global forces, including forces of empire, produce economic and cultural processes, and human motions, that undermine modernity's strategies of containment, we have witnessed a proliferation of spaces, as well as of claims to different temporalities. Perhaps it is living in a state of flux that predisposes intellectual life presently to stress motion and process over stable containers; traveling theorists are given to traveling theories, as cultural critics from

14 I have discussed these complications at length in my article "Modernity in Question? Culture and Religion in an Age of Global Modernity" for *Diaspora*.

15 I am referring to S. P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1997.

16 A. Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, London 1993.

17 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, New York 2003.

Edward Said to James Clifford have suggested by word or example.¹⁸ What is important is that we are called upon to face an obligation to view the past differently, to open up an awareness of what was suppressed in a historiography of order, and take note of the importance of human activity, including intellectual and cultural activity, in creating the world – what I had in mind when I proposed “performing the world” as the title for this paper; perform in the sense both of accomplishing the world and representing it, each one an indispensable condition of the other.

At the same time, in a world that seems to be caught up in a maelstrom created by forces that are productive at once of homogenization and heterogenization, history seems to be receding rapidly into the past, even as the past returns to make claims on the present “resurgence of history,” as the French writer Jean-Marie Guehenno puts it in his study of the decline of the authority of the nation-state under the assault of forces of globalization and the resurgence in response of a consciousness of the local.¹⁹ In the world of Global Modernity, we witness a return of civilizational claims, bolstered, ironically, by the same destabilizing forces of transborder ethnicities and diasporas, and calling for alternative epistemologies and alternative claims to historical consciousness. This is the case not just with the so-called “clashes between civilizations.” Different epistemological claims mark struggles over the future of the same civilization, as in the resurgence of biblical attacks in the United States on science and history, which draw upon works that pre-date-and, obviously, have survived-the Enlightenment. One such work is the biblical history of the world written by Bishop James Ussher in the 17th Century, which has been reissued recently. This work, *Annals of the World*, is apparently quite popular among evangelicals who have used it for inspiration in the construction of the proliferating Creation museums and theme parks across the United States.²⁰

The issue here is not merely national against transnational or world history, but the proliferation of space that attends the de-privileging of conventional modes of conceiving of historical spaces. The very deconstruction of national or civilizational spaces, in other words, raises the question of how to reconstruct history spatially and temporally, if that is

18 E. Said, *Traveling Theory*, in: id., *The World, The Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA 1983, pp. 226-247; J. Clifford/V. Dhareshwar (eds), *Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists*. Special issue of *Inscriptions* No. 5 (1989).

19 J.-M. Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, tr. from the French by V. Elliott, Minneapolis 1995.

20 J. Ussher, Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce, in: *Annals of the World*, Green Forest 2003. First published in Latin in 1658.

indeed a desirable goal. Why put Humpty Dumpty back together again, especially after seeing how much mischief he has done? In many ways, this is a fundamental question facing the practice of world history, which simply re-spatializes the past, not through a radical reconsideration of the spaces of history, but simply by rearranging existing spaces from a perspective that supposedly transcends them all. An anarchist (rather than Marxist – as Jerry Bentley would have it!) would see right away the consolidation of hegemony that may be at work in such a rearrangement.

The answer throws us back to the pedagogical functions of history, including world history. While we need to insist on a critical appreciation of the past that views nations and civilizations in their historicity, it seems to me that if world history is to achieve its pedagogical functions, we cannot cavalierly dispense with nations and civilizations in its organization any more than we can do away with national histories in the name of world history, or continents in the name of oceans, localized spatialities or networks.

Is there any way to bring these critical perspectives into history, in this case, world history, without falling into some kind of postmodern and postcolonial cynicism about past ways of doing history? This is *probably a problem that will be taken up also by other authors of this issue*. Here, by way of conclusion, I would like to put forth three considerations.

First, a distinction is necessary, I think, between world history understood as transnational history, and world history as a history of the world.²¹ The confusion of these two understandings of world history disguises the full significance of challenging national histories. The transnational is not the same as world-wide. More importantly, perhaps, the other side of challenging national history from supra-national perspectives is to bring to the surface sub-national histories of various kinds. The radical challenge of transnational history lies in its conjoining of the supra- and the sub (or intra)-national – which calls forth an under-

21 For examples of transnationality, by no means bound to projects of “world history,” see W. P. Webb, *The Great Frontier*, Lincoln 1980; J. Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, Princeton 1997; J. F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, Berkeley 2003; and, J. C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900*, Montreal 2003; and a more regionally oriented work, R. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Durham 2002. Most works viewed as world history should, less misleadingly, be described as transnational or translocal histories. The confusion points to the hold on the historical imagination of “world history” of past legacies.

standing of transnational as translocal, with all its subversive implications historiographically and politically. If national history serves as an ideological "strategy of containment," the containment of the translocal (as distinct from the world-wide) – as process or structure – is of immediate and strategic importance as it bears directly on the determination and consolidation of national boundaries. The translocal presents challenges that are quite distinct from the multi-cultural, which has been attached to world history, as one of its political and cultural goals. The difference may be the difference between abolishing national history (or at least cutting it down to size among other histories) versus placing it within the perspective of the world.

Second is to reconceive nations and civilizations not as homogeneous units but as historical ecumenes.²² This is readily evident in the case of civilizations conceived in terms of religions, from which the term derives. The volume edited by Michael Adas "Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order" provides a good example.²³ Jerry Bentley suggests in the article to which I referred above that an ecumenical approach is necessary to overcoming the Eurocentrism of world history. His intention is most importantly ethical. The concept of "ecumene," however, may also be translated into a way to grasp spatialities. I would like to suggest here that the idea of the ecumenical may be applied productively to regions, civilizations and continents, among other large entities, as well as to nations; the important issue being the foregrounding of commonalities as well as differences, and recognizing a multiplicity of spatialities within a common space marked not by firm boundaries but by the intensity and concentration of interactions, which themselves are subject to historical fluctuations. Such an understanding of ecumene accords with the term's etymological origins, meaning the inhabited or inhabitable world, which is how peoples from the Greeks to Europeans to the Chinese conceived of the world, which did not encompass the world as we understand it, but referred only to the world that mattered. It was modernity that invented one world out of the many worlds of earlier peoples, and even that has been thrown into doubt by so-called globalization that unifies the known globe, but also fragments it along fractures old and new.

22 "Ecumene" understood as "areas of intense and sustained cultural interaction." This definition is offered by John and Jean Comaroff on the basis of works by Ulf Hannerz and Igor Kopytoff. See, J. Comaroff/J. L. Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming*, Special issue of *Public Culture* 12.2(2000), pp. 291-343, p. 294.

23 M. Adas (ed.), *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, Philadelphia 1993.

If I may illustrate by an example from the part of the world I study, there has been much talk in recent years of a Confucian or Neo-Confucian Eastern Asia, and, of course, Confucianism long has been held to be a hallmark of a Chinese civilization that holds the central place of hegemony in Eastern Asia. It is interesting to contemplate when Confucius became Chinese; when he was rendered from a Zhou Dynasty sage into one of the points of departure for a civilization conceived in national terms. When the Japanese, Koreans and Vietnamese adopted Confucianism for their own purposes, all the time claiming their own separate identity, did they do so to become part of the Sung or Yuan or Ming, whom they resisted strenuously, or because they perceived in Confucianism values of statecraft and social organization that was lodged in the texts of a tradition that was more a classical than a Chinese tradition, and which unfolded differently in these different states.²⁴ This is what I have in mind when I refer to commonality as well as difference, even radical difference. It could be complicated further by the extension of the argument to the entanglement of societies in a multiplicity of ecumenes. What we call China itself did not simply grow from the inside out, radiating out from a Yellow River plains core, but was equally a product in the end of forces that poured from the outside in, from different directions, producing translocal spaces. These interactions of the inside and the outside produced the China we have come to know, which once formed, would contain them, and push their memories to the margins. Their recovery toward the center of historical inquiry recasts the history of China in more ways than one as I noted above.

In underlining the overdetermination of parts that resist dissolution into homogenized wholes, my goal is not to do away with history by rendering it into a conglomeration of micro-histories. I merely wish to illustrate what a radical and thoroughgoing historicism might lead to. The paradigm (or metaphor, if you like) is one that may be used productively in many cases. One of its advantages is that it also allows for different parts of the ecumene to react differently-and autonomously-with parts of different ecumenes. Regions may in some instances serve similar functions, but an ecumene conceived not in terms of physical proximity but social and cultural constructions may also be deployed across vast distances as, for example, with contemporary migrant populations spread across the globe.

24 For the most up-to-date, comprehensive and illuminating discussions of these issues, see, B. A. Elman/J. B. Duncan/H. Ooms (eds), *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam*, Los Angeles 2002.

The third consideration involves the worlding of world history – its relationship to living in a world that is as much about difference as it is about sameness or commonality. It may be that a day will come when all around the world will conceive of the world – and its history – in identical ways. Until that day arrives, however, we need to be attentive at all times to the limited standpoints and visions from which we think and write history, regardless of how global or universalistic we may wish to be. Societies around the world past and present have thought the world, and its history, differently, which must enter as a fundamental consideration into any practice of world history. This requires, I think, that world history can be written ultimately only as historiography – as an account not just of different conceptualizations of the world, but also of different ways of conceiving the past. This needs to be under girded by a consciousness of our own place in time; a self-reflexiveness that serves as a reminder that we are not at the end but somewhere along the course of history, and that the very next generation may demand a different kind of history than the one(s) that our imagination allows. Awareness of spatial and temporal restrictions is crucial, I think, to any critical practice of world history.

These are merely some thoughts toward different modes of thinking and writing world history that seek to account for processes of commonality and difference, unity and fragmentation, and patterns in motion of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Most important in this consideration is to fulfill the pedagogical goals of world history – the obligation at the most basic level to acquaint students and the public with the whos, wheres and whens of other societies – while also informing it with the critical perspectives demanded by contemporary global transformations-as well as visions of humanity that promise something beyond contemporary ideologies of order. How this may be achieved is secondary to the recognition of complexity – even chaos – in the first place. We need to remind ourselves that thinking, writing and teaching world history – indeed, all history – is not merely an exercise in description but also a performance in the double sense I described it above; as accomplishing and representing the world – not just what it has been, but what it has suppressed in the process of becoming what it is, and what it might yet become by recovering what has been suppressed.

The past is not just a legacy, it is also a project. That such an approach to the past opens it up to the possibility of appropriation for diverse political and social causes is a predicament, which may or may not be undesirable. How the world appears from different social contexts and perspectives, for example, would enrich our own limited concep-

tions of the world, which to me appears as a definite advance even if it complicates our tasks as historians, perhaps even makes them impossible. Then there is the biblical rewriting of history, with its own totalistic claims based on blind faith, which is as pernicious in its consequences for history as creationism is for understanding human evolution and development. All we can do is to acknowledge the presence of such alternatives as answering to different social and political needs over which the historian does not, and probably should not, have control. The best we can do is to ask of ourselves what *our* project might be, while we remain as true as possible to the evidence of the past in all its prolific variation-including variation over the meaning of the world, and of history.