Research Article

Xuetao Li*

Different Perceptions of "Interconnection" in Global History in the East and West – Possible Contributions from the East Asian Tradition to the Study of Global History

https://doi.org/10.1515/jciea-2025-0007
Received May 14, 2025; accepted July 8, 2025; published online August 13, 2025

Abstract: Although the concept of global history is an imported one in the Chinese context, a closer scrutiny of the "interconnections" within global history will reveal that the East Asian tradition, which is historically and textually influenced by Chinese and Han culture, has an advantage over the Western tradition in this regard. The discussion of this paper focuses on the American psychologist Richard Nisbett's book *The Geography of Thought*, which traces back to ancient times the patterns of thought in the East and West, reflecting the ancient Greek philosophers' deep interest in conceptual categorization. This trait shaped much of Western philosophical thought. Western philosophers in antiquity believed in the stability of the world and understood the natural and social world based on their own interpretation of fixed attributes or characters. The ancient Chinese, on the other hand, were not interested in categories; they believed the world was in a constant state of change, and the functioning of natural and social subjects was the result of the interaction of various forces in the environment around those subjects. Therefore, this paper posits that many ideas that have originated from East Asian thought, including "interconnection," would be useful in today's globalized world, and, together with Western thought, may become the basis for forming a new theory that could be beneficial to both sides in reflecting on global history issues.

Keywords: East Asian cultural circle; Chinese culture; Western culture; global history; interconnection

***Corresponding author: Xuetao Li**, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China,
E-mail: xuetaoli2013@163.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7198-1297

1 The Rise and Global Turn of World History Studies

The concept of "global history" originated from American historian William H. McNeill's (1917–2016) book *The Rise of the West*: *A History of Human Community*, whose impact was quickly felt in the English-speaking world when it was published in 1963 (McNeill 1963).[1] It brought new light to the understanding of world history as an aggregation of the histories of different regions of the world, and explored the interconnections within world history in terms of the influence of different civilizations on each other in the past, especially the profound influence of Western civilization on the rest of the world since the Age of Discovery (c. 1418 – c. 1620). Although the narratives of "European origins" and the "global influence of European civilization" are represented in the book, McNeill noticed the interconnection of different civilizations, nations, and cultures – in other words, that these did not develop in isolation. In the book, he argues that social contact with foreign civilizations was a major force for historical change.

It was not until the 1980s that "global history" became a hot topic of study. And it was only after the 1990s that European and American scholars began to attach importance to global history research methods, and the history of particular subjects was given a "global turn". In the early years of the 21st century, several major works of global history appeared, contributing to the popularity of "global history" as a research method and a research object. The following representative works are worthy of attention.

The Norwegian historian Sølvi Sogner (1932–2017) was an expert in the demographic history of the European continent and the history of European migration (Cf. Sogner 1994; 2012) before she turned her research interest to global history. In August 2000, the 19th International Congress of the Historical Sciences was held in Oslo, and in 2001 Sogner edited the book *Making Sense of Global History* (Sogner, 2001), which contains papers on cutting-edge research in global history, including cultural contacts between continents over the centuries, the multiple constructions and divisions of periods in history, and understandings and misunderstandings of history.

Antony Gerald Hopkins (1938–), a professor at Cambridge University who specializes in the economic history of Africa and the history of globalization in the colonial era, edited *Globalization in World History* (Hopkins 2002), in which he

1 This book won the American National Book Award in 1964, and, in its revised edition, the author added a preface. Its Chinese translation is also available: Sun Yue, Guo Fang, Li Yongbin, trans., *Xifang de xingqi*: *Renlei gongtongti shi*, Beijing: Zhongxin Chubanshe, 2015; Revised edition, 2018.

argues there are two characteristics of "globalization" in world history. First, the book provides a systematic classification of the types and phases of globalization up to the end of the 20th century; second, it highlights that previous discussions have greatly underestimated the fact that globalization is not the newest expression of the "rise of the West", nor is it likely to be unique to the West. Drawing on their expertise, these historians from different fields highlight the importance of themes from China, South Asia, Africa, and the Islamic world as well as Europe and the United States, across the past three centuries, in the hope of placing specific historical topics within a new research perspective and a broader global context.

The book *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Bender, 2002), edited by Thomas Bender (1944–), collects papers by historians who ask so many questions about both nationalism and the discipline of history itself that the American national narrative in a broader context needs to be reconsidered and reconstructed. "Global History" offers new ways of thinking about traditional themes and time periods in American history: It places the study of American history in a transnational context, and the history of the United States since its founding is presented in relation to other nations, thus allowing us to recognize an alternative national history that is in constant interaction with other cultures.

In his book *Navigating World History*: *Historians Create a Global Age* (Manning 2003), Patrick Manning (1941–), a professor of world history at the University of Pittsburgh, offers an important option for teachers of world history. He provides a comprehensive overview of the studies of world history from a perspective of "interconnection". Moreover, he reviews multiple models of research and debate in the past and suggests guidelines for history teachers and world history researchers to follow.

The Global History Reader (Mazlish & Iriye, 2004), co-edited by Bruce Mazlish (1923–2016), a professor of history at MIT, and Akira Iriye (1934–), a professor of history at Harvard University, includes important essays by international historians examining such hot topics as time and space, migration, natural environment, terrorism, global culture, human rights, the information revolution and multinational corporations, and the global environment in an orientation that transcends the boundaries of nation-states.

Historians used to adopt a political or cultural unit as a yardstick, emphasizing the isolated development of a single nation-state within the context of, for example, "civilization", "nation", or "family". After the "global turn", world history scholars began to focus on interconnection, and realized that the above-mentioned units are actually not independently formed. They then turned to study interactive relationships by looking for parallel developing patterns among the units. If we examine the internal logic of world history studies in the last century, we will find that, until the 1990s, historians concentrated on relatively stable categories, and then began to turn

to correlations. In addition, they also began to focus on synchronizing historical events, examining multiple layers of an important event within the same time frame.

2 Cognitive Patterns in East and West: Experimental Insights and Cultural Roots

In her famous book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) provided an in-depth analysis of the character of the Japanese people. The focus of chapter 12, entitled "The Child Learns", is on the impact of children's education on their adulthood. Benedict asserts that the education received as a child is decisive to Japanese people throughout their lives (Benedict 1946, pp. 253–296). In fact, this is not unique to the Japanese, because early education and experience will influence who we are and what we do in future.

The American psychologist Richard Eugene Nisbett (1941–), on the other hand, elaborated on the different thought patterns of people in the East and West, based on his study of child behavior. After receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia University, Nisbett served as co-director of the Culture and Cognition Program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and became a distinguished professor in the field of social psychology. His research interests include social cognition, culture, social classes, and aging issues. Over the years, Nisbett has been working on the differences between patterns of thought in the East and West, and in 2003, he published *The Geography of Thought* (Nisbett 2003). According to Nisbett, systems of human perception and thought are not the same, and although Asians and Westerners have maintained very different ways of thinking for thousands of years, these differences can be measured in a scientific way. Moreover, environmental factors dominate genetic factors in determining intelligence. What Nisbett calls "Asians" here corresponds to the concept of the "*kanji* cultural circle". According to the Japanese scholar Sadao Nishijima (1919–1988), the identifying characteristics of countries in the "*kanji* culture circle" include the use of Chinese characters as the medium of communication, Confucianism as the ideological and ethical foundation, principles and regulations as the system of law and order, and Mahāyāna Buddhism as the religion (Nishijima 1985, pp. 7–11). Based on these criteria, Nishijima proposed the concept of a Chinese cultural circle that, in addition to China itself, includes Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, the Korean Peninsula, and Vietnam.

Nisbett did a very interesting experiment: he divided American children (representing the West) and Chinese children (representing East Asia) into two groups, and showed them three pictures, namely "chicken", "cow", and "grass". He then asked them to classify these objects into two categories. The results were that most

Chinese children classified "cow" and "grass" into one category and "chicken" into another; while most American children classified "cow" and "chicken" into one category, and "grass" into another (Nisbett 2003, p. 140). In his analysis of the experiment, Nisbett opined that Chinese children were used to classifying objects according to their relationships, while American children preferred to group objects into the categories to which they belong as "entities". Thus, according to "relations", cows eat grass, so "cows" and "grass" are considered to be in the same category. According to their fixed "categories", "cow" and "chicken" are animals, while "grass" is a plant. According to Nisbett, the results of this experiment showed the difference in the thought patterns in the East and West: Chinese children see first the relations and then the entities connected by the relations, while American children see first the entities that embody the categories and then build the relations between them.

Subsequently, Nisbett conducted a similar experiment with college students from the United States and China: the college students were asked to classify pandas, monkeys, and bananas, with the result that the Chinese students preferred to group monkeys and bananas, while the American students showed a strong preference for grouping monkeys and pandas (Nisbett 2003, p. 141). The results of this experiment suggest that the thought patterns formed in childhood carry over into adulthood.

In his book, Nisbett also records another experiment he did together with his Japanese student Takahiko Masuda. They showed eight colored animated underwater vignettes to students at Kyoto University and the University of Michigan. The scenes were all characterized by having one or more "focal" fish, which were larger, brighter, and faster-moving than anything else in the picture. Each scene also contained slower-moving animals, as well as plants, rocks, bubbles, etc. The first sentence from the Japanese participants was likely to be one referring to the environment: "It looked like a pond"; while the first sentence from the American participants referred to the focal fish: "There was a big fish, maybe a trout, moving off to the left." In other words, for the Japanese, the objects were connected to their environment; while for the Americans, their perception of the objects was completely detached from their environment (Nisbett 2003, pp. 89–90). That is, if Americans focus on the central objects of a photograph, East Asian people spend more time on examining the photograph as a whole.

What Nisbett was trying to demonstrate through his experiments was that people think about the world, and even see the world differently, due to the differences in their ecological environments, social structures, philosophies and educational systems. The great differences between Asia and the West can be traced back to the traditions of ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy. Generally speaking, the Greeks believed in the stability of the world, and understood nature and human society in analytical and atomistic terms, that is, based on their interpretation of fixed attributes or characters. They regarded the objects of study as discrete and separate from their

environment, and regarded events as moving in a linear fashion and subject to human control. These can be considered some of the reasons for their great achievements in the natural sciences. But if we look at the world from the philosophical perspective represented in the *Book of Changes*, we notice that the ancient Chinese were not interested in unchanging categories; they preferred to see the world from a holistic view; they tended to study the whole picture, especially the background events; they were good at observing the relations between events; they saw the world as a complex and changeable entity, and that its components were interconnected; they thought that good things and bad things were transformable; and they believed that if control over events was needed, it needed to be coordinated with others. As Nisbett notes:

> For the Chinese, the background scheme for the nature of the world was that it was a mass of substances rather than a collection of discrete objects. Looking at a piece of wood, the Chinese philosopher saw a seamless whole composed of a single substance, or perhaps of interpenetrating substances of several kinds. The Greek philosopher would have seen an object composed of particles. Whether the world was composed of atoms or of continuous substances was debated in Greece, but the issue never arose in China. (Nisbett 2003, p. 18)

Thus, for Nisbett, the Chinese world itself is composed of different kinds of relationships. No event occurs in isolation from others, and nothing is not embedded in a meaningful whole in which the elements are constantly changing and rearranging themselves. According to the Chinese method of reasoning, the Western way of thinking about an object or event in isolation and applying abstract rules to it leads to extreme and erroneous conclusions. Nisbett's experiment mentioned above also sufficiently demonstrates that people in Asia look at the big picture; they look at objects in relation to their environment to the extent that they have difficulty visually separating objects from their environment. In contrast, people in the West focus on objects and care less about the environment; they locate fewer relationships in objects and environments than Asians do: "The Chinese pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole."(Nisbett 2003, p. XIII).

3 Beyond Eurocentrism: Interconnection as a Historical Principle in East Asian Thought

If Nisbett's claim is valid, then Western narratives of world history since the modern era should be largely based on fixed attributes and stable boundaries. It was not until McNeill's *The Rise of the West* in the 1960s that Western historians gradually began to focus on the interaction and exchange between the West and the rest of the world, and

after the 1990s, when a large number of global history studies began to be published, it became the consensus of historians to pay more attention to "interconnection". No historical element can develop in isolation; it is only through interaction with other elements that can it be understood. In fact, it is only after interaction with others that the self is formed and fixed as a "true self". Recognition of our interconnectedness allows us to abandon the previously held doctrines of Eurocentrism and the miracle of Europe. The development of Europe and the world is no longer seen as an autonomous process explained by internal factors, but as the result of various exchanges.

To see and understand the world in a certain category or in a fixed mode has been a characteristic of Western disciplines since ancient times, especially in modern times, but it has never been the way of thinking of people in East Asia. Therefore, while talking about a "global turn" in Western world history studies implies a "breakthrough" and a paradigm shift, for East Asian scholars, the world has always been a product of interconnected relationships.

I will also provide two examples from the Buddhist stories of the Chan/Zen tradition to illustrate the importance of "interconnection". A dialogue from *A Compendium of Five Lamps* goes like this:

> The monk asked: How to thoroughly master Buddhism as a monk? The master said: The east is surging and the west is sinking. He said: what will it be like after that? The master said: The soil is fertile and the eggplant is tender. (Vol. 15, "Chan Master Siguang from North Pagoda", *A Compendium of Five Lamps*, *Manji Zokuzokyo* X80-321a)

Buddhism proposes that the key to understanding is not to recognize the separateness of things in themselves, but to understand the interconnectedness of things, the relationships between them, and the transformation of the "potential" between them. Only from this perspective is one able to thoroughly master what one aims to achieve. In fact, what we see from global history is not the knowledge of a country or a region, but the history of relations between countries or regions. Therefore, what we used to think of as the history of the "strong" over the "weak" should be more accurately expressed as a history of mutual interaction. According to Fernand Paul Braudel (1902–1985), even if cultural zones based on geographical features are relatively stable, they still interact with and permeate each other, and no culture's boundaries are static and completely closed (Braudel 2003, pp. 30–32). In fact, all civilizations emerge and develop through constant contact, exchange and interaction. There is no such thing as an isolated form of civilization that has no relevance to the outside world. In the *Record of the Green Rock*, it is said that:

> Facing the bright mirror, the ugly will be distinguished from the pretty; when the sword is in the hand, to kill or not will depend on the right time; when the Han goes, the Hu comes; when the Hu goes, the Han comes. (Vol. 1, *Record of the Green Rock, Taishō Tripiṭaka*, T48-149a)

The intermingling of Hu and Han Chinese, and the interchange between them, was considered at the time to be disorderly and, therefore, immoral. The American sinologist John King Fairbank (1907–1991) considered China's modern history to have developed in response to the "impact-response" paradigm. He considered Europe to be a dynamic modern society, while the Chinese empire was a long-stagnant traditional society that lacked the internal dynamics of its own development. The external challenges brought by Europe were a stimulus for China, providing an opportunity for it to progress. In other words, it was only after the impact of the arrival of the Europeans that traditional Chinese society could throw off its shackles and modernize. Fairbank's view is typical of the assumption that one side one side typically feels it has on the other. It is only "when the Han goes, the Hu comes; when the Hu goes, the Han comes" that really goes beyond Eurocentrism and shows the mutual influence of both sides.

4 Holism and Complexity: Toward a Complementary Global Epistemology

In *The Geography of Thought*, Nisbett argues that Asians, compared with Westerners, have two outstanding cognitive advantages: first, Asians see more of a given scene or context than Westerners do; second, Asians have a holistic, dialectic, Middle Way approach to solve problems (Nisbett 2003, p. 212). That is, in contrast to Americans, who prefer to categorize subjects and then identify the patterns, people in East Asia have a perspective that looks at things as a whole. The East Asian cultural tradition, shaped by Chinese culture centered on Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and the use of Chinese characters, embodies a holistic view and emphasizes the interrelationship of things. Thus, many ideas in global history represent a transition from categories to relationships. While this is a new way of thinking in Western culture, these ideas are fairly common to East Asian scholars who value "relationships".

The French philosopher Edgar Morin (1921–), who advocated the "complexity theory", was particularly fond of Blaise Pascal's words: "Since everything, then, is cause and effect, dependent and supporting, mediate and immediate, and all is held together by a natural though imperceptible chain which binds together things most distant and most different, I hold it equally impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole and to know the whole without knowing the parts in detail."(Morin 2004, p.2) What Morin highlighted was the relationship between the whole and the parts. He realized that the rationalist approach of classical science, through empirical induction and mathematical deduction, helps effectively with the location of the concise and clear laws that can explain complicated facts. Therefore, he proposed that caution should be

exercised regarding the traditional mode of thinking that fragments and simplifies various disciplines. He supported the idea of establishing a comprehensive research model that could integrate various kinds of knowledge by elaborating the complexity of the study of humanities and social sciences. He aimed at the transformation of human thinking, by which he meant that his theories must enter the realm of individual consciousness and allow the educated to understand the complex world in a relational-historical way by changing the patterns of actions. In his article "Le paradigme perdu: la nature humaine ("The Lost Paradigm: Human Nature," 1973)," he writes: "The moment of a closed, fragmented and simplified human science is over; the era of an open, multidimensional and complex science begins."(Cf. Morin 1988, p. 154) Both the ideas about interconnection consistently represented in Chinese culture and Morin's theory of complexity share many similarities with the concept of global history advocated by the world historians in the West since the 1960s, for these are precisely what has been lacking in the research methodology of national histories since the formation of nation-states. Because of the different historical and cultural backgrounds of the educated in the East and West, the holistic sense of global history and the concept of interconnection means different things to scholars with different backgrounds.

Nisbett's study has been criticized by cultural anthropologists in the U.S. who argue that most of experimental subjects were college students and the biased sample made it methodologically flawed. They also point out that his interpretation assumed an Asian/Western dichotomy and ignored differences in "categories" such as gender, religion, and race, etc. (Ortner 2003) At any rate, Nisbett proved through various experiments that cultural differences have a much greater impact on people's thought processes than is commonly believed. He also argues that "cognitive orientations and skills of East Asians and people of European cultures are sufficiently different that it seems highly likely that they would complement and enrich one another in any given setting."(Nisbett 2003, p. 217) Thus, in today's globalized world, many concepts common in East Asian thought, such as interconnection, when combined together with Western thought, could result in the formation of a new theory that is beneficial to both sides in their reflections on global history issues.

5 Conclusion: Rethinking Interconnection – East Asian Contributions to Global Historical Thinking

The development of global history as a discipline has marked a paradigmatic shift in historical research, especially in how we understand the relationships among peoples, regions, and civilizations. While the Western tradition of historiography has

long emphasized linear causality, categorical differentiation, and stable boundaries, global history calls for a relational perspective that values interdependence, complexity, and interaction.

As this paper has shown, the East Asian intellectual tradition – shaped by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophies – has long embodied a holistic worldview. This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and views change as a constant product of dynamic relations. These ideas, deeply embedded in East Asian thought and practice, align remarkably well with emerging methodologies in global history, which seek to overcome Eurocentric narratives and explore the entangled, multi-directional flows of culture, economy, and ideas.

Through a close reading of Richard Nisbett's psychological experiments and Edgar Morin's complexity theory, it becomes clear that East Asian ways of thinking – focused on the whole rather than isolated parts, on relationships rather than categories – provide both a philosophical foundation and a cognitive model that can enrich global history as a discipline. While criticisms of the cultural essentialism in Nisbett's work are valid, his fundamental insight remains: diverse cognitive styles shaped by different cultural traditions offer complementary perspectives on how we understand historical processes.

From the metaphorical teachings of Chan Buddhism to the historical realities of civilizational interaction between Han and Hu peoples, East Asian thought provides a deep reservoir of concepts and interpretive tools to reimagine the "interconnection" at the heart of global history. In this sense, the contribution of East Asia is not merely empirical or regional, but also theoretical and paradigmatic. It offers an alternative epistemology – one that is urgently needed in a world that is increasingly interconnected, yet struggling to make sense of that very connectedness.

By embracing a pluralistic and transcultural approach to global history, scholars can move beyond dichotomies and toward a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past. The East Asian tradition, far from being a peripheral or reactive participant, has the potential to play a central role in shaping the future of global historical thinking.

(Translated by Dr. Wu Siyuan, Associate Professor, Western Washington University. The original Chinese version was published in *Yazhou yu shijie* [Asia and the World], 2023, volume 6).

Acknowledgments: This article is translated by Dr. Wu Siyuan, Associate Professor of Western Washington University. Many thanks to Dr. Wu for his strong support.
Research ethics: The local Institutional Review Board deemed the study exempt from review.
Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individuals included in this study.

Author contributions: All authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.
Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.
Research funding: None declared.

References

Bender, Thomas, eds. 2002. *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Benedict, Ruth 1946. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. London: Secker & Warburg.
Braudel, Fernand Paul. [1963] 2003. *A History of Civilizations. Translated by Xiao Chang. Nanning*. Guangxi Normal University Press.
Hopkins, A. G. 2002. *Globalization in World History*. London: Pimlico.
Manning, Patrick 2003. *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Mazlish, Bruce, and Akira Iriye, eds. 2004. *The Global History Reader*. New York: Taylor & Francis Ltd.
McNeill, William H. 1963. *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Morin, Edgar. 1988. "Oder die Komplexität des Denkens." In *Französische Denker der Gegenwart. Zwanzig Porträts*, edited by J. Altwegg, and A. Schmidt. München: Verlag C. H. Beck.
Morin, Edgar. 2004. "The Merging of East and West." In *Les Sept savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du futur*. Translated by Chen Yizhuang. Beijing: Peking University Press.
Nisbett, Richard. 2003. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently…and Why*. New York: Free Press.
Nishijima, Sadao. 1985. *The International Environment of Japanese History*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
Ortner, Sherry. 2003. "East Brain, West Brain." *The New York Times*.
Sogner, Sølvi. 1994. *Ung i Europa: norsk ungdom over Nordsjøen til Nederland i tidlig nytid* [Youth in Europe: Young Norwegians who crossed the North Sea to the Netherlands in the early modern period]. Oslo: Pensumtjeneste.
Sogner, Sølvi, eds. 2001. *Making Sense of Global History: The 19th International Congress of the Historical Sciences*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
Sogner, Sølvi. 2012. *Og skuta lå i Amsterdam: et glemt norsk innvandrersamfunn i Amsterdam 1621–1720* [Passenger ships moored in Amsterdam: a forgotten Norwegian immigrant community in Amsterdam (1621–1720)]. Oslo: Aschehoug.