

the spatial scale of American imperialism. While this is not the book that Hopkins set out to write, such an approach would nonetheless have had a better claim to the mantle of global history. Until that book is released, however, Hopkins has made his mark, and has made it well. *American empire* is a provocative, perceptive, and compelling step towards a richer integration of American, European, and world history.

### The prospect of global history

*Edited by James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 222. Hardback £36.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-873225-9.*

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These are curious times. Global history is booming. This wide-ranging anthology is one of many that have appeared in recent years. There's global intellectual history, global conceptual history, global economic history, global ancient worlds, and global crises of the seventeenth century. A casual observer might fairly wonder if globalists are storming the discipline. If they are, it might be a long struggle. Recent evidence of foreign language training shows that the Angloworld is becoming more, not less, monolingual. American universities may not be platforms for Nation-Firsters, but they are becoming more parochial. Area studies are being downsized. What counts as social theory depends ever more on evidence from one country.

The editors of *The prospect of global history* do not address the anomaly squarely. What they do do is confront the complicated and even contradictory ties between global

history and globalization without assuming that the latter is as monolithic or irreversible as many of its champions once supposed. One might say that the introduction by the Oxford trio of Belich, Darwin, and Wickham maps out a prospect for global history not by severing the field from triumphal (or, more recently, tragic) narratives of globalization but by rescuing globalization from the present. The introduction explores the fissures between an older tradition of comparative history and the more recent turn to connected approaches. But just as comparative studies could seldom disentangle the units being contrasted, and had to concede to embedded or reciprocal strategies, so connectedness covered for a lot of different ways of understanding the tethers across societies. These range from contact, interaction, and circulation to the most intense form of connection, integration – when the parts of the global whole become co-dependent. The prospect of global history will have to rely on more nuanced and complex terminologies and typologies.

The essays that follow take a look at some of those nuances and complexities to reveal variations in intensity of globalization. For instance, Nicholas Purcell shows how incense got traded across the Swahili Coast, India, and the Mediterranean. But this was hardly a case of muscular integration, even though the use of aromatics became a shared ritual. On the other hand, according to Purcell, the meaning and value of incense consumption were not of a piece and adapted themselves to local mores and norms. By contrast, Linda Colley's essay on the diffusion of constitution writing shows how modern thinkers and scribes relied on charters to legitimate their states in a global political order that increasingly required regimes to have constitutions to get recognition and access to trade and financial markets. To be rescued from the present, we are going to need a wider repertoire of understandings of what

we mean by globalization, from softer notions of 'influence' or diffusion to dependency.

Once globalization is not synonymous with our post-Cold War age, the debate over its rhythms and timing gets the spotlight. If the decontrolling of markets associated with neoliberalism was not the main turning point, what was? Robert Moore's essay, for instance, makes the case for a shift around 1000 with the turn in urbanization, suggesting a global middle ages of interlinked urban hubs increasingly capable of absorbing and storing surpluses. By 1500, there was no turning back. If there have been previous globalizations, is there a way to understand how and when they worked and when they did not? For this, Jürgen Osterhammel recommends looking at a sometimes-forgotten ally: historical sociology. He lays out five strategies for mutual betterment – which from the global historian's perspective help us get beyond the temptation to catalogue links and connections all over the place, and get closer to reckonings about the durability, causes, and declines of global integration. In this respect, the book is more suggestive than illuminating – and one can take the problem of periodization as an invitation to a coming research agenda and great debate.

Going global does not mean dumping comparative histories in favour of entanglements and connectedness. Indeed, a recurring theme for the field is the xylophone of convergence and divergence. It is laid out in Kevin O'Rourke's confessions of an economist, which chart the ways in which historical evidence can illuminate economists' quest for insights into when and how societies broke out of traps and lunged ahead of others, or slipped behind. He makes the case – which more global historians should heed – that prices can tell us stories about the pace, depth, and unevenness of market integration. Included are ways to understand better the winners and losers.

At the same time, as essays by Matthew Mosca and Francis Robinson show,

comparative histories can carry unwanted baggage. Mosca demonstrates that the 'new Qing history' is trying to break away from old normative assumptions about the deep origins of Chinese 'decline' in its putative isolationism compared to the West, to look at the Manchu turn to Central Asia. Robinson also challenges 'clash of civilization' commonplaces, which implied essential, unchanging features to Islamic societies. Instead, Islam was 'connected' from the start, and by the eighteenth century echoed what he calls a 'Protestant turn' which emphasized consciousness and personal responsibility in a new sense of self – which does not exactly conform to stereotypes of Islamic involution and secular decline.

The two concepts that this book most focuses on are how to think about global circulation and the means of mobility through networks. Rescuing globalization from the present means thinking beyond market circulation. James Belich, for instance, argues that it was the movement of viruses and diseases after the Black Death that re-sorted global demography and spread Europeans. This volume looks at print media, soldiers, travellers, and other non-economic actors as makers of a world economy. It also highlights institutions beyond the political fare of states or the economic staples of markets. Networks appear to occupy a large, if slightly unbounded, middle tier between formal political structures and private exchange mechanisms. In this sense, Anthony Hopkins' essay about the American 'empire' as a regime that was less bent on conquest and colonization in order to integrate, but rather relied on more informal means to lace the world together, highlights different enabling structures for movement, exchange, and integration. He does not label the American global style as networked, but he easily could have. He ends with a claim that could be better posed as a question: if empires have passed, where are the informal

networks that once sustained global integration going to get their buoyancy nowadays?

This is a small book packed with ideas, insights, and suggestions for future research and debate. These may be days of anti-globalization. But *The prospect of global history* shows us why they may be fertile ones for global history.

### Global trade in the nineteenth century: the house of Houqua and the Canton system

By John D. Wong. Cambridge:

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During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, no entity was more important to the commercial relationship between China and the West than the Hong merchants. They served as the exclusive intermediary between two economies. So powerful were they that Britain resolved to remove them, achieved by force during the First Opium War (1839–1841). In the eyes of historians, the Hong merchants were a group of parasites feeding off the imperial Canton system. It was said that they lacked flexibility and independence, and that they failed to adapt to radically changing international realities in the first half of the nineteenth century. Such readings prevailed in both academic and popular accounts.

Challenging convention, John D. Wong offers a fresh and distinctive take on Hong merchants in *Global trade in the nineteenth century*. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of six chapters.

The first chapter recreates the context against which the Wu family and its firm emerged. The second chapter shows how Wu Bingjian (known as Houqua) handled the new challenges brought by the mounting influence of British merchants in the global economy. Wu succeeded in deepening the East India Company's dependence upon him for tea, though the latter had tried to avoid such a situation. Another strategy that Wu adopted to contain the expansion of the British company was to found his own commercial corporation in concert with some American merchants, the subject of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 explores how Wu cultivated the trust of his American partners, permitting him to extend his trade network into the United States. Chapter 5 examines how the partnership between the Wu family and its American friends continued after the death of Wu Bingjian in 1843, and the way in which it shifted due to the demise of the Canton system. Chapter 6 discusses how the large sum of capital that Houqua invested in his American partners' firm supported its operations until 1891.

Until now, scholars in both China and the West have given little attention to the concrete details of commercial interactions between the Hong merchants and their European counterparts. As a result, no-one has questioned the traditional picture. By detailing the transactions and the relationship between Houqua and the Westerners, Wong gives the lie to the traditional portrait. He notes that, in the early nineteenth century, there was a growing imbalance in the relationship between Canton and the foreign traders. But, in his example, the Hong merchants reclaimed the advantage by acting realistically and flexibly. The victory of the Houqua firm over its British counterparts provides powerful evidence. Although the East India Company was the major exporter of Chinese tea and thus got the upper hand in the trade, the strategies adopted by the