

The Significance of Turning to Global History for National Historiography

Yifei Liu*

Abstract—Nation is a key framework for historical research since the discipline has appeared. However, the circumstance began to change in the 18th century when globalisation began. With the era of globalisation, historians have rethinking about should the nation-state still be the centre of historical research. With the rise of global historiography and its core component, transnational history, national historiography faces severe challenges. Many global historians are asking for the abolishment of national historiography. Moreover, many transnational historians are advocating for replacing nations with larger units for the historical framework. For example, Fernand Braudel wrote his famous book *Mediterranean*, which depict the history of all the nations surrounding the Mediterranean. After the publishment of the *Mediterranean*, historians such as Alison Games are advocating for using the ocean instead of the nation as a new historical framework. Nevertheless, many opponents are defending the status of national historiography. They remind historians that the writing of history is served as support for the rule of the nation. So national historiography will continue to dominate historical research as long as the state continues to exist as a political unit. There are also plenty of historians who firmly believed that national historiography would coexist with global historiography in the future.

Index Terms—Historiography, nation, global history, transnational history, ocean.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th century, with technological changes, the entire world has become more and more connected, and the world view reflected in the minds of historians has begun to change. In the 20th century, global history gradually became the background for historical research. Global history transcends national boundaries, nationalities, and regions. The nation, as the main historical research framework, faces a severe challenge. As historian Sebouh David Aslanian said, “shift upwards of geographical scale from the unit of the nation-state to larger and more encompassing units that the world history movement has set in motion [1].” Under the influence of global history, transnational history, which lays stress on looking beyond the nation, becomes a crucial historical research field. Transnational historians started to replace the focus on the nation with larger units of focus such as ocean boundaries as a new framework for historical research. Many global historians are gradually ignoring national history in their research. In contrast, many historians still insist that nation isn’t obsolete and will continue to serve

as an essential framework for most historical studies. To them, national history is still of critical importance even with the context of historians turning to global history and will remain popular in the future. Sebastian Conrad argues that “nations have shaped many societies, and in many respects, their institutional reality—the political order, the welfare state, the knowledge systems, and much more—are still nationally determined.” He conceded that some topics might even suffer distortion when forced into transnational frameworks. But, for many questions, the national focus will remain a critical level of analysis [2].

II. GLOBAL HISTORY

Global history has generated a detrimental impact on national historiography and the writing of national history. Many historians are questioning the rationality of the nation as a framework for historical research. The conclusion drawn from David Thelen is that, “national history is unethical because it delegitimises the more authentic identities of ordinary people and that it simply cannot capture the complex identities of those living in the borderlands, in the spaces between nations [3].” And there is an increasing number of people living like this with the development of globalisation. Thelen gives an example of “Mexican immigrants who live and have familial and economic ties on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border.” Thelen reminds historians that the histories of the people in this group won’t be recorded in either American or Mexican history [3]. Aslanian saw the nation as a useless framework in the article *AHR Conversation How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History*. Aslanian explained that “In my opinion, it is a given that the ‘new’ world or global history (and I don’t see a fundamental difference between the two) needs to operate with a scale of analysis that supersedes the conventional unit of the nation-state [4].” Thomas Bender carries this point further by emphasising that historians should think beyond the nation-state as they contextualise the historiographical importance of their work since history and humanity are not in fact enclosed in boxes, whether national, ethnic, local or continental.” Bender has argued that if historians put American history within global historiography, they will understand much historical development better than researching American history in national historiography. And “If historians impose artificial nation boundaries on their objects of study, they will fail in their mission to explain the causes and the effects of past actions [5].” Moreover, Conrad acknowledged that the shift to global history yields a certain amount of threats to the study of the nation as a historical framework. As he illustrated in his book named, *what is global history*, he says, “It means to change the terrain on

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Yifei Liu was with the School of History Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.

*Correspondence: s1810717@ed.ac.uk

which historians think.” Therefore, Global history is a direct challenge to numerous container-based paradigms, and national history is the most notable one. However, he also indicated that not every research project requires a global perspective, and it is not always the global context that is most central to the issue. And he deemed that it would be a mistake to regard global history as the only valid approach. Thus, he considered that, “global history approaches should not attempt to replace the established paradigm of national history.”

III. TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

Transnational history as an essential proponent of global history emphasises the importance of looking beyond the nation by replacing nations with larger units as historical research frameworks. With the rise of transnational history, the nation's role in historical research has been gradually forgotten. David Armitage, a scholar of intellectual and international history at Harvard, declared a provocative argument in 2012, “the hegemony of national historiography is over”. He explained that there had been enough proof from various historiographies to conclude that these transnational linkages have been decisive, influential, and shaping across human history. So historians should question themselves if they haven't started to work on transnational projects [6]. Aslanian very much supports this view and puts forward that the national optic cannot understand many problems under global history. Aslanian provides the reason for making this point in an AHR conversation “As we have seen, since at least the early 1990s, world historians have, rightly, in my opinion, shifted optics or scale away from the conventional (small) units or nations to larger ones of hemispheres, continents, seas, oceans, and so on, ultimately encompassing the globe, and they have done so because the conventional units of analysis deployed by professional historians seemed incapable of making sense of such large-scale processes as cross-cultural exchange and circulation, biological diffusion, population movements, and so on, much of which took place outside the boundaries of any given single state.” The pioneer of replacing nations with larger units as frameworks is Fernand Braudel, who depicted a Mediterranean world (which is shown in Fig. 1) where social forms and trading patterns were dictated by climatic and geomorphologic constants regardless of the cultural backgrounds of the peoples who resided within these environments [7]. He is very much influenced by global history and proposes the idea of using the ocean to replace the nation as the principal object for historical studies.

IV. IMMIGRATION HISTORY

When the world is connected more closely than before, there are also many immigrations from one place to another. Pier M. Larson believed that those immigration history could only be told through global historiography. And with transportation becoming more accessible than before, there will be an increasing amount of history related to immigration. And national historiography is not suitable for those topics. Larson analysed the history of African slavery.

Larson argues that millions of African slaves are being forced to migrate to America. More importantly, some of them has been forced to relocate again to other places. The history of African slaves does not belong to the history of any country in the world [8]. And as Jorge Canizares-Esguerra wrote that “it is only by looking at slavery in this global context that the uniqueness of Atlantic slavery can be understood.”. Esguerra further his argument by talking about Hawaii. Esguerra notes that Hawaii's inhabitants currently are come from different parts of the world. Apart from local indigenous people, many Asian people from China and Japan and islands on the Atlantic, such as Puerto Rico. As Esguerra said that “Today, Hawaii's unique culture represents its dual Atlantic and Pacific heritages.” So, global history can capture many accounts globally, which national history fails to do. [9] James Belich, John Darwin, Margaret Frenz and Chris Wickham believed “a global approach makes it hard to see how the history of different nations can continue to avoid each other.” They think there is much cultural interaction in history that the global history approach can only capture. Silk Road is one of the most famous trade routes in history, which connect China with the middle east and through the middle east. This route connects China to Europe. For example, the transportation of tea to Europe cultivates the tea culture in Europe. And with the increasing number of Arabs migrating to China for Trade. They bring the Islamic religion to China as well. Millions of people are Chinese but originated from the Middle East. And there are frequent interactions between China and India which brought Buddhism into China and soon spread to Japan and other South-eastern Asian countries. [10] Alison game argued that there are many Christian preachers who travel all the way from Europe to the world, which bring Christianity to the whole world. And those preachers are why Christians have dominated the world currently. However, these people's history is certainly won't be documented in the national history of each nation. But, those histories were crucial to world development which historians should not just ignore. So, they believed they should use global history as a new dominant framework for historical research.

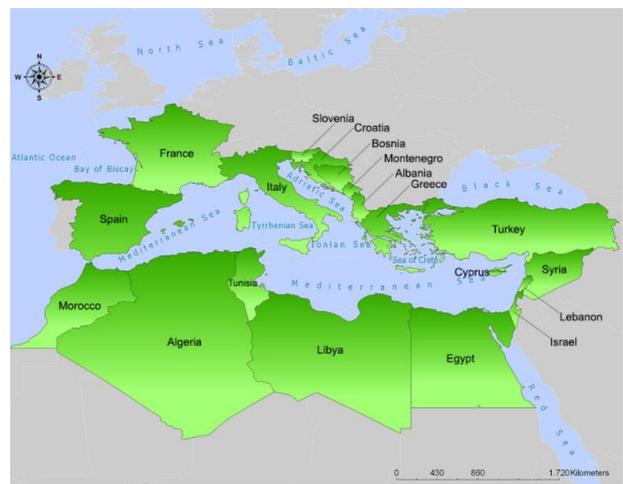


Fig. 1. List of mediterranean countries.

V. OCEAN — A NEW RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Within the global historical context, which focuses on

networks, the ocean becomes more appropriate than the nation as the unit for historical research. As Sugata Bose suggests, “temporal extension of oceanic history has helped contest the idea that national frames necessarily took centre stage from the nineteenth century onward.” Furthermore, the Atlantic ocean has become one of the most popular topics for historical research in recent years. With the turn to global history, historians began to take the Atlantic ocean as a unit instead of the nation for research to understand colonial pasts and imperial history better. Alison Games notes, “research topics related to the expansion of Europe and global interaction in the early modern period, precisely the types of studies likely to engage scholars of colonial societies, do not lend themselves well to single regions and currently historians consequently find themselves struggling to write nonnational histories within national paradigms.” Games believed that taking the Atlantic as a unit of study instead of a single state will be a helpful solution to these dilemmas [11]. Games also mentioned that the Atlantic served as a neutral unit for historical research, and this political neutrality empowered researchers seeking to elude the limitations of the nation-state moving toward the Atlantic borderless world. This political neutrality encouraged scholars seeking to escape the restrictions of the nation-state to move toward the borderless world of the Atlantic. A similar view is shared by Thomas Bender, the author of, *The Atlantic in global history*. Bender mentioned in his book that “the focus on the nation or singular empires overlooks the great Atlantic diasporas or at least distorts them, obscuring the geographical extent of their dispersion.” Bender is significantly influenced by global history, which focuses essentially on immigration. Therefore, He believed that “the Atlantic perspective offers a complete account of the African diaspora, including the complex identities formed in the diasporic experience which can’t be achieved by a national view.” Erik R. Seeman came up with a slightly different idea toward Atlantic history by arguing that so far, most historical studies are still centred on nations. Seeman conceded that colonial North American history has become transnational to a certain degree. However, currently, “American colonial history is still organised around the needs of a national narrative that privileges the teleology of the ultimate creation of the United States, and for colonial North American history with an Atlantic, the twist is still dominated by the pedagogical and ideological needs of the nation.” And Seeman supported his argument from a U.S. history survey at American universities, which testify his argument that most teaching of the colonial period is centred on the formation of the United States even if this part of history is taught from an Atlantic perspective. Survey also shows that the area that does not belong to Britain but is part of the United States currently, such as Florida, has more content to teach than Peru or Mexico in colonial studies.

VI. NATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

The rise of the national historiography does not imply the decline of the national historiography. Robert Aldrich and Stuart Ward has focused on post-colonial history and argued that national historiography is still critical for most nations in the world. They gave an example of France, which provided independence to Algeria in the early 1960s. France begins to

develop its own national history. Because France was conquered by Germany during the second world war, its national identity has been ambiguous for a long time. During the French Empire period, France has incorporated different cultures into its own. Aldrich and Ward believed France needed to create its own identity now. As they argued that, “Having finally abandoned Algeria along with the bulk of France’s other overseas colonies by the early 1960s, President de Gaulle used the geometrical emblem as a way of reconciling the country to the loss of its imperial status by trying to convince it that its newly circumscribed form was the embodiment of a uniquely French rationalist-universalist mystique.” So, French national history will still thrive by incorporating the history of all people who live in France regardless of where they originally came from. Similar idea has been shared by Stephen Berger, who insists in continue writing of national history. Berger pointed out that even in Britain, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are also seeking to construct their national history, and this idea has been intensified with globalisation. So, Britain will have its national history as a united nation. But, there will also be the national history of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Berger believed that the rise in global history should not erase national history. Berger furthered his arguments by the example of German. Similar to France, Germany was affected a lot after the second world war. And with the reunion between East Germany and West Germany, Germany was desperate to find a way to unite people. And national history will surely provide the most appropriate route for it. As Berger said, “for German historical consciousness, this would be the moment in which a democratic Western understanding of the nation became the accepted master narrative of German national identity. For British historical consciousness, it would be the moment in which Britishness faded away and was replaced with three separate national identities (and possibly nation-states), England, Scotland and Wales. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, national narratives in both countries remain hotly contested, and the future seems wide open. But one should not be fooled by those who proclaim a declining importance of national narratives in the globalised era.”

VII. COEXISTENCE OF GLOBAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND NATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

With the rise of the global view of history, some historians believe that the nation is no longer suitable for historical research, and they call for a larger unit to replace the nation. But, at the same time, there are still many historians who firmly believe that turning to global history won’t shake the nation's status as the framework for historical research. Most of their views are founded on the theory that national and global historical perspectives can coexist. In response to the critics of global history toward national historiographies, Andrew Zimmerman explains, “transnational history does not break with national or regional historiographies, but rather engages them intensely, brings them into dialogue, and seeks to contribute to each of them in ways that might have been impossible by focusing on any one historiography individually.” Zimmerman has been advocating that the shift to a global history has provided a direction for combining

multiple historiographies rather than abolishing national historiography. Stephen Berger agrees with Zimmerman by viewing transnational history as the conjunction with the national narrative instead of against it. Moreover, Berger has concluded that everywhere national history is needed for political purposes, and since nation-state is still a vital political reference point now, national histories will proceed to linger expansive in chronicled writing. To Berger, “it was the very strength of that national framework which ensured that the national paradigm was successful in accommodating and subsuming religious, class and race histories. Berge pointed out that transnational history is trying to challenge the nation’s dominant status since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, national history is still prevalent in every nation right now. Johann N. Neam defends the nation’s status as a framework in historical research in his article, *American history in a global age*, by arguing that “Americans and the world continue to need thick national histories that appeal to a particular political community’s shared past and symbols.” And Neam considered that rejecting national history is equivalent to requiring abandoning the history of all groups. Neam sees the new methods generated from the global history of studying nations and nationalism as the tool which “have reinforced rather than undermined the legitimacy of national history within the discipline.” Neam admitted that “to some extent that transnational and sub-national histories help us better understand U.S. history and that national historians should welcome them.” But Neam also insists that “there remains a difference between understanding the relationship between the American nation-state and the world and vice-versa, which continues to place the American nation-state front and centre.” From the perspective of national history, Neam is confident that the nation remains the centre of historiography [11]. The final conclusion he made from the article, *the American history in a global age*, is, “Because we Americans share a collective identity and a thick tradition that sub-national and transnational perspectives can spur not just our pride and shame but also our sense of responsibility and in short, globalisation has not displaced the need for national history but has made it all the more important [12].” Gary Nash backs up the opinions of Neam by noting that the criticism from global historiography won’t reject national history. Instead, it will help national history to adapt to global historiography. Nash’s conclusion is to rewrite national history within the global context, not to abandon it.

VIII. CONCLUSION

According to the discussion above, it is easy to realise that national historiography will lose its original dominant position since many historians such as Thomas Bender begin to replace nations with larger units such as the ocean as their historical framework. National historiography is the only way scholars research history comes to an end. As Aslanian said, “to the extent that world or global history is a consequence of late-twentieth-century time-space

compression, globalisation, and the waning of the nation-state system.” But, national historiography will not vanish in historical writing because many national historians continue defending the nation’s status for historical writing. As Stephen Berger noted that, “as I have argued elsewhere, it would be premature to see those national master narratives as having been in terminal decline since 1945. As the histories of the class had lost much of their identitarian clout by the 1980s, it left the door wide open for the reemergence of the nation as the prime identitarian focus for history writing.” And it highly likely that global historiography will coexist with national historiography in the future since the global history approach is appropriate for some historical topics. Similarly, the nation will continue to be the historical framework for some other historical studies that can be understood better by national historiograph. Conrad recognised that all aspects of historical scholarship could be subject to a global perspective. However, Conrad also reminds us that the global history approach is not a panacea or a free pass. According to Conrad, “Not every research project requires a global perspective; it is not always the global context that is most central to the issue.” Conrad believed that because everything is not linked and connected to everything else, “it would be a mistake, certainly, to regard global history as the only valid approach— either in terms of its historiographical perspective or in the reach and density of the entanglements it explores.”

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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