World History: A Vehicle for Understanding Ourselves

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Sifting through old family photos, I marvel at the strangely remote people that are my genetic ancestors. The subjects of these black-and-white images fall into two distinct groups. My mother's ancestors are stern, stiffly posed Korean men and women in hanboks, with neatly done hair and uniform expressions. Meanwhile, my father's Dutch, French, Finnish, and Swiss ancestors wear Victorian-era Western suits and dresses with soft smiles. "Can you believe that you're related to them?" my mom once asked me. No, I actually could not believe it. At least not until I took World History, and it all started to make sense that it was not just individual events in history, but larger themes and trends that explain how a half-Korean, half-European kid grows up in a Southern California surf town. I now understand that World History is a uniquely powerful tool for observing contingent actions and events as reflections of broader historical themes and thus better understand our own personal histories and ultimately our places in this overwhelmingly complex world.

Nothing is inevitable. Instead, historical actions and events are contingent upon one another. A comprehensive understanding of the interwoven causal relationships between seemingly disparate historical events gives students a more nuanced conception of the world, its unique cultures, and even their own lives, as well as those of their ancestors and relatives. For example, in my AP World History class this year, we covered Imperial Japan's expansion into new Asian and Pacific territories; one of which was the Korean peninsula—where my grandfather was born in 1933. Eventually Japan infamously over-extended when its military launched a coordinated attack on the Pearl Harbor military base in Hawai'i, spurring the United

States to enter the Second World War. While examining the end of the war, my teacher devoted significant time to tracing the roots of the Korean War. He explained how, at the 1945 Potsdam Conferences, American and Soviet officials agreed that the U.S.S.R would join the war effort in Asia on August 8. Two days before the planned Soviet arrival, the United States dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. Japan did not surrender until Nagasaki on August 9, but before that surrender Soviet forces invaded the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. In subsequent years, the area which had been penetrated by the U.S.S.R would become Communist and later, launch an invasion of the southern peninsula, sparking the Korean War.

This war immediately enveloped my grandfather's rural Korean village just miles south of the now Demilitarized Zone. My grandfather's older brother was forcibly enlisted in the North Korean People's Army, and after the war my great-grandmother would die of a "broken heart" searching for him. With seemingly nothing left in Korea and forever ambitious, in 1961 my grandfather left Korea for the United States as a student, as the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act ending the national quota system was still in place. The events that drove my grandfather to immigrate to the United States are a complex web of interconnected, contingent occurrences; Japanese industrialization and expansion under the Meiji Restoration resulted in the Second World War which laid the rudiments of the Korean War which prompted my grandfather to leave the isolated village his ancestors had inhabited for generations and come to America.

Global events similarly drove the migration of tens of millions of people from Europe to the United States in the late 1800s, including my paternal ancestors. Their individual motivations were varied - my Swiss paternal great-grandfather was a Protestant minister seeking religious freedom, while my Dutch great-grandfather was a disgraced naval officer who had committed the inexcusable act of marrying a French divorcee - but their individual decisions to immigrate to

the United States were part of a huge wave of mass migration. Historical actions and events each contingent on a host of other seemingly unrelated actions and events, and each driving the actions of my own ancestors to abandon their ancestral homelands for a new and very uncertain opportunity in the United States.

World History's immense scope allows students to draw connections between such otherwise seemingly unrelated historical events. Through contextualization, students grasp broad and pervasive historical themes which help explain the present state of our world and often our own lives. In addition to learning about Asian history outside of a Eurocentric framework, World History taught me to observe broader patterns in human migration and societal development. Perhaps the most foundational and sweeping of these trends is examined by David Northrup in his 2005 article, "Globalization and the Great Convergence: Rethinking World History in the Long Term," in which he argues that "world history can be divided into just two ages: one dominated by divergence and, since about 1000 C.E, an age of convergence." As Jerry H. Bentley further explains in his 1998 article, "Hemispheric Integration," the miraculous interconnectedness of our modern world is not a new phenomenon, but the culmination of a thousand years of interregional integration; an integration that began as a trade in luxury goods along Muslim-controlled Indian Ocean and Trans-Saharan trade routes and, through numerous iterations, from the Silk Roads to European maritime empires, has remained a common thread through World History ever since.

I cannot help but feel that my multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural background is the "result" of a thousand years of global conversion and increasing worldwide interconnectedness. Northup's division of World History provides a useful framework for observing the rise and fall of human civilization - as well as the "convergence" of my own

ancestors when my parents met at college in the 1980s. Considering my ancestors' actions in such a world historical context, I was able to connect and contextualize the independent actions and events they each endured and responded to, and comprehend my own relation to the sweeping history that interconnects us all.

A lot of students at my school claim that World History is simply too broad to provide valuable insight into any one historical event. Yet, it is precisely its breadth that makes World History such a powerful tool for understanding at so many different levels. Ultimately, World history provides the structure that stabilizes our understanding of these events, and the lens to focus on specific events within the endless layers of context surrounding each. As Hawaiian, Chinese, and English community leader and cultural preservationist Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu observes in her 2015 TEDx Talk, it is essential that we "search the path that we have all come down, so that we know the road that we will travel." World history allows us to not only search that path but understand it in all its depth and complexity.