

Teaching World History at Chinese Universities: A Survey

Since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, and especially since China carried out reforms from the policy of opening up, enormous progress has been made in *world general history* education in China. In order to create a picture of the current teaching conditions of this subject at institutions of higher education in China as well as to pinpoint the main channels of transmitting knowledge about *world history* to students, we conducted a survey in early 2005. With this project we also intend to provide useful and practical information for scholars engaged in the study of *world general history* and to encourage teaching reforms in this field.

I. Statistical information from the teacher survey

We distributed one questionnaire to 50 universities, inviting a teacher engaged in the teaching and study of *world history* to fill it out.¹ We received responses from the following 37 universities: East China Normal University, Shandong University, Wuhan University, Fudan University, Beijing Normal University, Sichuan University, People's University, Nanjing University, Nan Kai University, Northeast China

1 According to the discipline structure in the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, *world history* is one of eight subdisciplines under history. The other subdisciplines are: theory and philosophy of history, archaeology and museology, historical geography, philosophy of historical documents, special history, ancient history of China, and modern history of China. Thus teachers who are engaged in the teaching and studying of *world history* generally stay in the same teaching and research section. The main courses or subjects they offered include: *world general history*, special history, dynasty history, and national or state history. Among them, *world general history* is a compulsory course or subject while others are selective. The education of *world general history* is different from that in the U.S. and other countries, for *world general history* in China refers to the history of other countries except China, which means to harshly add up each national history. The so-called *world history* in the U.S. and other countries, which is led by American research and is focused on global relationships and mutual cooperation, is named *global history* by Chinese scholars, so as to distinguish itself from the conceptions of *world history* and *world general history* in China.

University, Jilin University, Neimenggu University, Zhengzhou University, Shanghai University, Nanjing Normal University, Hunan Normal University, Hebei Normal University, Southwest China Normal University, Shanghai Normal University, Qufu Normal University, Shanxi University, Ningxia University, Heilongjiang University, Anhui Normal University, Middle China Normal University, Huaibei Coal Industry Teachers' College, South China Normal University, Capital Normal University, Liaocheng University, Hubei Teachers' College, Hunan University of Science, Xihua Normal University, Yanan University, An Shan Teachers' College, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Baotou Teachers' College, and Jiangxi Science and Teachers' College. Seventeen of these universities are considered first-rate universities; 19 are the key normal universities of their province; and 4 are common universities (some are double-counted). Among the 37 persons who participated, 5 are deans or presidents of universities that teach or study *world history*, 14 are leading scholars in the discipline of *world history*, and 18 are common teachers in *world history*. We believe that this survey is sufficient to reflect the basic condition of *world general history* education in China and that its results provide abundant and comprehensive first-hand material that is thought-provoking.

At the 37 universities investigated, a total of 366 people are engaged in teaching and studying *world history*. Among these, 152 (42%) have been abroad for further studies. An analysis of the age distribution shows that the number of respondents from the age group 20 to 30 years is 43 (12%); 31 to 40 years, 135 respondents (37%); 41 to 50 years, 112 respondents (31%); 51 to 60 years, 68 respondents (19%); and above 60 years, 8 respondents (2%). The highest educational level of participants is as follows: 59 participants (16%) have a bachelors degree, 107 (29%) have a masters degree, and 200 (54%) have a doctoral degree. 263 participants (72%) have a senior professional title.

Looking at the data above, especially at the large number of people who have been abroad for further study and who hold a doctoral degree or senior title, there is no doubt that there is a high level of achievement within the discipline of *world history* in recent years. Yet if we classify these 37 schools into three kinds according to the standard or level of the discipline of *word history* at each, we still find great differences among them.

Table 1: Teacher Qualifications

Type	Number of universities	Members employed	Further study abroad	Doctoral degree	Senior capability
I	11	143	98 (69%)	101 (71%)	118 (83%)
II	17	158	49 (31%)	79 (50%)	106 (67%)
III	9	65	5 (8%)	20 (31%)	39 (60%)

With regard to the total number of class hours of *world general history*, we have information on 36 universities. At 1 university the program spanned 6 semesters; at 9 universities, 5 semesters; at 13 universities, 4 semesters; at 12 universities, 3 semesters; and at the remaining university, 2 semesters. The total number of class hours at the different universities are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of Class Hours of *World General History Teaching*

Universities	Class hours
3	400 and above
12	301 to 399
12	251 to 300
4	201 to 250
4	151 to 200
1	150 and below

Fourteen universities (38%) offered *world general history* in their non-history departments, 18 universities (49%) did not offer it at all, and 5 (15%) did not answer. Excluding the course of *world general history*, 80% of the universities offered more than 10 *world history* elective courses.

To gain a more in-depth view of the teaching methods and quality in the field of *world general history*, we developed the following selective questions.

1. Do you adopt multimedia techniques in your course(s)?

usually	13 persons (35%)
sometimes	20 persons (54%)
few	2 persons (5.5%)
none	2 persons (5.5%)

2. Which teaching methods are used in your *world general history* course?

thoroughly explain entire contents	1 person (3%)
emphasize key events and difficult developments	14 persons (38%)
supplement with extra knowledge to keep up with international studies	21 persons (57%)
instruct students to learn by themselves, supplemented with extra material based on international studies	7 persons (19%)
other ways	1 person (3%)

From these results we conclude that most teachers not only understand the basic foundations of *world general history* education, but they also incorporate the advanced international research into their courses to widen the students' horizon. To the subjective question, "Do you have any suggestions for improving upon teaching methods?" many good ideas were offered, which mainly focused on several aspects mentioned further below (see section II). As to the topic of multimedia teaching, 12 respondents stated that more multimedia methods should be put into practice; the source-building of multimedia teaching should be strengthened; materials or source documents should be shared among institutions; and multimedia materials should be edited for use. Other teachers argued that multimedia methods should not be promoted too much, as they are only audio-visual aids and cannot replace the traditional methods of historical science. Nine teachers proposed that the teaching should be combined with classroom discussion to motivate students to study. The textbooks on *world general history*, the teachers believe, should be revised constantly so that new study results can be incorporated; references should be appended to each chapter and textbooks should include historical maps. The prevalent textbook *World History* should be revised as soon as possible.² In addition, it is imperative that teachers constantly improve their own knowledge of the theory, methods, and research of *world history*. In order to overcome the high degree of specialization, teachers should foster a broader view of *world history*. They should be familiar with the relevant materials and studies, reinforce intercommunication with other scholars, and attach more importance to language training in both Chinese and English.

2 According to our survey 23 institutions use *World History* (six volumes), compiled by Wu Yujin and Qi Shirong.

Global history has become the focus of international historiography since the 1980s. To gain the view of history teachers in China on this subject, we asked the following questions:

1. Are you familiar with *global history*?

Very	5 persons (15%)
a little	28 persons (75%)
heard of	4 persons (10%)

2. Do you give lessons in *global history*?

Yes	24 persons (67%)
no	4 persons (11%)
no answer	8 persons (22%)

3. Have you ever read books about *global history*?

usually	6 persons (16%)
sometimes	29 persons (78%)
no	2 persons (6%)

The teachers have read the following *global history* books: Stavrianos' *A Global History*, Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*, Wallerstein's *Modern World System*, Frank's *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Toynbee's *The Study of History*, and others. These results prove that teachers have a certain familiarity with the Western tradition and current international scholarship in world and global history.

Teachers articulated, however, widely varying views on *global history*, which are very enlightening. Out of 37 teachers investigated nearly 30 offered their opinions on the topic. Some teachers make a positive evaluation of *global history*. Their arguments can be summarized in six points:

First, the field of *global history* is one that a rising China should take up and that is beneficial when trying to reestablish the *world general history* system after having gotten rid of the fetter of ideology. The key to *global history* lies in its completely new approach. It is neither a superficial change of traditional general history nor the result of a balanced history in area studies. Its focal point is not the nation but the greater region. *Global history* treats the globe as a whole from the angle of domestic politics, nation and race, geography and climate, cultural tradi-

tions, and diplomatic relations, and aims at investigating the features and trends of global history developments by exploring the exchanges and relationships among people, nations, regions, and countries. *Global history* attempts to thoroughly abandon the influence of Eurocentrism and to express the particular Chinese understanding within the international discourse on *world history*. Eurocentrism refers not only to the discipline system but also to the way of research that copies academic results or theories from others, lacking new thoughts and methods.

Second, *global history* could macroscopically draw the general outline of the whole development of *world history* and avoid Eurocentrism.

Third, as a representative historical research method, *global history* is useful to understand the complex world and avoid regarding the program of *world general history* as national history.

Fourth, *global history* reflects an interdisciplinary approach and applies systematic thoughts and methods to historical research.

Fifth, in an era of globalization *global history* opens up new research fields in the study of *world history* and indicates new ways for its future. Sixth, *global history* provides the tools to study the history of the world in its entirety; it offers a structure for its development and highlights trends.

Besides these positive reactions, teachers also expressed their perplexity and anxiety about how to apply *global history* in the course of teaching. Five points were raised. First, *global history* is an effective theoretical method for analyzing history and doing historical research. It emphasizes transnational relationships in the development of history and is helpful in deconstructing Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism. However, it should not be used when compiling textbooks and teaching courses. Especially in the field of ancient history it has led to an artificial exaggeration of relationships among ancient peoples. Therefore, *global history* brings many perplexities into teaching and therefore should not be proposed in the teaching of ancient history.

Second, although *global history* is very useful, its scope is more complicated and intimidating to students. Furthermore, the degree of difficulty of the courses increases rapidly. It therefore makes much more sense to teach history by focusing first on geographical areas. Once the students have mastered the key issues of *world history*, they are then more capable of grasping the concepts of *global history*.

Third, *global history* should be understood and comprehended fully by every teacher who teaches *world history*, even those who teach Chinese history. But the problem still remains, how to effectively teach

global history well, how to incorporate it into the courses, and how to join theory and practice successfully.

Fourth, while *global history* is objective and scientific, it is nonetheless based on a microcosmic view of history. Above all we must teach the essential historical facts. Only after this can we introduce the global dimension of history to students.

Fifth, *global history* is helpful in mastering the general developments of *world history* and placing the significant historical events in an international context, but it is difficult to teach.

In addition to these points, some teachers put forward their suspicion of the term “*global history*.” They believe that it cannot be called “proper history” but that it does provide a legitimate angle to investigate certain questions.

II. Statistical information from the student survey paper

For the student survey, we distributed 340 questionnaires to students at 9 universities: Nankai University, Shandong University, Sichuan University, East China Normal University, Middle China Normal University, Tianjin Normal University, Qufu Normal University, Liaocheng University, and Capital Normal University. We received 313 responses, from which we can draw some conclusions about the degree of students’ understanding of *world general history* and their assessment of teaching and textbooks, as well as their degree of satisfaction with this field. The main questions and feedback are presented below.

1. Do you like the course of *world general history*?

like	188 persons (60%)
generally like	114 persons (37%)
dislike	10 persons (3%)

2. How often do your teachers of *world general history* use multimedia?

Very often	87 persons (28%)
sometimes	101 persons (32%)
little	78 persons (25%)
never	48 persons (15%)

like	188 persons (60%)
generally like	114 persons (37%)
dislike	10 persons (3%)

2. How often do your teachers of *world general history* use multimedia?

Very often	87 persons (28%)
sometimes	101 persons (32%)
little	78 persons (25%)
never	48 persons (15%)

3. What kind of teaching methods do your teachers of *world general history* often use? (multiple choice)

lectures	284 persons (91%)
discussions and disquisitions	125 persons (40%)
comparisons	105 persons (34%)
demonstrations	63 persons (20%)
others	15 persons (5%)

4. What kind of teaching methods are your favorites? (multiple choice)

lectures	99 persons (32%)
discussions and disquisitions	189 persons (60%)
comparisons	130 persons (42%)
demonstrations	138 persons (44%)
others	33 persons (11%)

5. How do your teachers use the *world general history* textbooks? (multiple choice)

vivid description about all the contents	31 persons (10%)
highlight the key and difficult points, sketching others	194 persons (62%)
supplement extra knowledge as well as key and difficult points; keep up with advanced international research	150 persons (48%)
simplify the textbook contents, lead to self-learning, add extra knowledge, and keep up with advanced international studies	75 persons (24%)
others	22 persons (7%)

6. What means do your teachers use to evaluate your performance?
(multiple choice)

questions (quiz)	50 persons	(16%)
written tests	262 persons	(84%)
homework	93 persons	(30%)
research papers	182 persons	(58%)
others	27 persons	(9%)

The responses indicate that most students like *world general history*. From the teachers questionnaire we found out that economic growth led to the improvement of teaching facilities in universities, which allows most teachers to use multimedia if necessary. However, we find that the students estimate the usage of multimedia at a lower level. Aside from this, almost half of the teachers provide extra knowledge in class, keep up with the advanced international studies, and elaborate on the key and difficult points in their classes. The result shows that within postgraduate education, especially that of doctors, teaching standards have improved. However, when it comes to teaching methods, most teachers use traditional means, such as lectures. In contrast, the discussion/disquisition approach is favored by the students. Moreover, teachers usually assess students by written tests. All of these aspects should be deeply discussed and used to improve the present conditions of *world history* teaching.

With regard to these current teaching conditions students suggested six points on how to improve the *world general history* program. First, the necessity to read more foreign history masterpieces. Students suggest that teachers should help them read those books and state that it is better to read some thoroughly. For a beginner, teachers should introduce easier books and frequently conduct activities on reading and comprehension techniques. In addition, recommendations of references on *world history* for selective reading are also needed.

Second, students want to obtain more perceptual knowledge about *world general history*. Multimedia, video documents, classical movies, and introductions of foreign customs are seen as good ways. In order to enhance students' comprehension of geographical spaces, or "spatial perception," textbooks should contain both characters and pictures, particularly history maps.

Third, teachers should talk more about important world topics and try to guide students from ancient to modern times.

Fourth, it is suggested to diversify the means of examination. For example, papers could be used in addition to final examinations.

Fifth, students expect to be offered advanced foreign language classes in order to be able to read more original documents from other countries. In addition, they propose to enforce the study of historical theories and methods and to extend class hours of *world general history*.

Above and beyond classroom teaching, more attention should be paid to students' acquisition of knowledge by themselves, i.e. self-directed learning. We received the following responses to our questions.

1. Have you read any extra books?

usually	67 persons (21%)
sometimes	221 persons (70%)
none	24 persons (9%)

2. If you have read some, please list your favorites. The most popular books are as follows

<i>History</i> by Herodotus	14 persons
<i>The Bible</i>	10 persons
<i>Germania</i> by Tacitus	6 persons
<i>Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i> by Edward Gibbon	6 persons
<i>Arrian Anabasis Alexandri</i> by Arrian	5 persons
<i>The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy</i> by Jacob Burckhardt	4 persons

We also investigated the condition of students' understanding of *global history* using the following questions:

1. Do you know something about the viewpoint of *global history*?

very much	2 persons
basic	154 persons
heard of	138 persons
none	20 persons

2. Have you read some books about *global history*?

regularly	9 persons
some	119 persons

only occasional	150 persons
none	35 persons

3. Which books have you read?

<i>A Global History</i>	73 persons
<i>Modern World System</i>	12 persons
<i>Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age</i>	12 persons
<i>The Study of History</i>	12 persons
<i>The Great Divergence</i>	4 persons

III. Conclusion

With the combined results of the teacher and student surveys, we can sum up the current teaching conditions in *world general history* at Chinese universities. With the quick recent development of the Chinese economy, the increasing possibilities of international and national communication, and especially the high-speed development of postgraduate education, teaching facilities were greatly improved and library resources turned abundant. In addition, teachers have improved their academic credentials and broadened their perspectives. All these factors created a beneficial background for teaching reforms. However, many problems need to be resolved in *world general history* education.

With the burgeoning of *global history*, the traditional *world general history* faces great challenges. Our traditional *world general history* is only pieced together by national history and area history. *Global history* pays more attention to the relationships and exchanges among different parts of the world. Our traditional *world general history* teaching is transforming into the “real” *world history* as *global history*, this change, however, is not received with enthusiasm by all teachers. Some are not advocates of *global history* and have problems to combine theory and practice into their teaching as well as to compile *global history* textbooks. One reason for these problems can be seen in the completely different approach of *global history*, which is a kind of microscopic *world history* – or in other words, a kind of *new world history* that is the result of synthetically combining historical theories with methodology. The traditional *world general history* courses are generally arranged in the first or second academic year, and therefore students’ knowledge about area studies and national history is limited and lacks a broader

theoretical foundation. Young teachers who initially approach this subject also feel inadequately prepared for their tasks.

What are solutions to these problems? First, *world general history* should be taught by sophisticated teachers in the third academic year. In the first and second-year courses, such as Chinese history, national history and historical theory and methodology should be arranged, which are helpful to lay the foundation for learning *world general history*.

Second, it is necessary to improve textbooks. Our survey of teachers and students has proven this point. We should compile textbooks on special areas and national history, omit the contents on national history in *world general history* textbooks, and focus on the relations and mutual exchanges among different parts of the world.

Third, we should standardize the class hours of *world general history* at all universities. The investigation has showed that the class hours of this subject currently vary from 420 to 120.

Fourth, teaching methods must be improved. We should change the traditional method to *discussion and disquisition* and guide students in solving problems independently while reading. Finally, there need to be some changes in *examinations* and means of scoring students.