Themes of World History

How can a thematic approach help us make sense of world history?

Introduction

The UN lists Melaka as one of its world heritage sites. Formerly known as Malacca, the city developed under Malay, Portuguese, and Dutch influences.

With thousands of years of human history, studying world history can become extremely difficult and complicated. To manage such a deep and wide subject, historians take various lenses, or approaches, to the study of world history. These lenses allow historians to examine the past in different ways, and even discover new information.

One approach is the “Western heritage” model. It focuses on classical civilizations of the Mediterranean world—such as Greece and Rome—followed by the history
of Europe and other Western nations. In this approach, other world regions—such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America—get little or no attention.

Another approach might be called the “different cultures” model. It maintains a Western focus but includes coverage of the rest of the world. The goal is to provide a foundation in Western civilization, while promoting understanding of other cultures. This approach treats the world as a collection of separate regions, however, with little to connect them.

*History Alive! World Connections* takes a third approach. It adopts a “big picture” view of world history, stepping back to see the world as an interconnected whole. It provides details about specific countries and regions, but presents those details in a larger, cross-regional and global context. While highlighting the world’s diversity, it also makes connections and comparisons across cultures. It examines history from a global perspective, seeking to identify common patterns in historical events around the world.

One way historians identify patterns in world history is by applying themes to the study of the past. In this lesson, you will learn about the themes used in this program. You will also learn about key concepts and ways of thinking that will help you organize information and enhance your understanding of world history.
This is a Renaissance-era cathedral located in Florence, Italy. Historians can look at an event such as the Renaissance through different spatial frames. For example, a historian might study the beginnings of the Renaissance within the city of Florence. Or, they might zoom out to an interregional perspective to examine how Renaissance ideas spread throughout Europe.

1. Organizing History

Historians seek to create accurate, meaningful accounts of the past. This task can present great challenges, especially when the history they recount lies in the distant past and may include vast amounts of evidence to sift through. To carry out their work, historians rely on certain concepts to help them organize and
interpret information and make sense of history.

**Key Concepts**  Two of the most important concepts that historians rely on concern perspectives on time and space. These concepts help historians organize world history into specific topics. This organization makes it easier to study and research world history.

Historians often divide history into periods of time. They may base these periods on a major turning point, such as the development of agriculture. Or, they may base them on a unifying principle or theme, such as revolution. Dividing history into periods allows historians to present events in order. It also helps them make connections among events and highlight patterns in history across the globe. This process of dividing history into periods is known as **periodization**.

Three long periods often appear in world history courses. They are:

- ancient,
- medieval,
- and modern.

These periods generally reflect turning points in the history of Western civilization, such as the fall of Rome, the Renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution. They are less useful for other parts of the world, however.

A second key concept, known as **spatial frames**, concerns the different geographic perspectives that historians apply to world events. One way to understand this concept is to imagine that you are looking down on Earth from high above, watching human events with a powerful zoom lens. If you focus on a small area, you can see events taking place in a single nation. Zoom out a little and you will see events in the region where the nation is located. Zoom out a little more and you will get a larger, **interregional** view of events in two or more regions. If you keep zooming out, you will eventually get a global view. These different perspectives—national, regional, interregional, and global—are spatial frames.

By applying spatial frames to the study of history, historians can make comparisons and see larger patterns. For example, they might see that trade in a particular nation reflects economic trends in a larger regional, interregional, and global context.
The compass was invented in China over 2,000 years ago. It then spread across the world, changing constantly as different peoples made adjustments to it based on their own needs. European explorers would come to rely on the compass to navigate the world.

**Habits of Mind**  
When studying history, it can be useful to adopt certain ways of thinking. Historians refer to ways of thinking as “habits of mind.” Three habits are particularly helpful in the study of world history.

The first habit is to look for global patterns over time and space. This means examining events at different times and in different places to see how they might be connected. It also means connecting local events to global trends. An example of this might be looking at how a war in one part of the world caused migration that influenced life in another place years later. Or, it might be looking at how a development in one place, such as an invention, changed life around the world.

The second habit is to make comparisons within and among societies. An event or historical process may or may not have the same effect on all members of a society. It may also have similar or varying effects on other societies. Careful students of history look for similarities and differences in the ways societies respond to change. Comparing how societies around the world have adapted to the rise and spread of industry is one example of how historians study changes within and among societies.

The third habit is to assess *universal standards* in light of cultural differences. Universal standards are ideas or values that are said to apply to all people, like human rights and democracy. Although claims for such standards may seem
reasonable to many people, not everyone understands these ideas in the same way. In some parts of the world, these ideas may not be accepted at all. Careful students of history examine such claims in historical context, not suspending judgment but developing cultural awareness and understanding.

**A Thematic Approach** Historians also use themes to identify patterns in history. Many possible themes can apply to historical events. Two broad themes are continuity and change, that is, the way things have stayed the same or changed over time. Two other broad themes are integration and difference. *Integration* refers to ways in which the peoples of the world have been drawn together by historical factors. *Difference* concerns how they have remained distinct and diverse.

*History Alive! World Connections* highlights five themes in world history: cultural interaction, political structures, economic structures, social structures, and human-environment interaction. Studying history with these themes in mind will help you make connections among events and interpret the past.

### 2. Cultural Interaction

The way cultures interact is a key theme in world history. *Culture* is the shared beliefs, practices, and traditions of a group of people. Throughout history, people of different cultures have exchanged ideas and adopted new beliefs and customs. This spread of cultural influences is known as *cultural diffusion*. At the same time, people have also rejected outside influences and come into conflict over new ideas.
The triumphal arch is an example of the theme of cultural interaction in world history. The building of triumphal arches dates back to ancient Rome. Shown here is the Arc de Triomphe, located in Paris, France, one of the best known examples of a triumphal arch.

In some cases, cultural interactions have led to positive changes. In the 1700s, European philosophers popularized the idea that all political power comes from the people. Since then, many nations have moved toward the democratic system of government. Most of these nations have also committed to affirming human rights both within and outside their borders.

Inspired by the philosophers whose works inspired democracy, philosophers in the 1800s and 1900s popularized the idea of human rights. These ideals have affected how different groups, including women, the poor, religious or racial minorities, and LGBTQ groups, are treated within the societies they live in.

On the other hand, cultural interactions have also had negative effects, or created tensions. When Europeans began to colonize South America, they both intentionally and unintentionally killed native populations. Those who were not
The study of how cultures have interacted and developed over time is crucial to our understanding of the world. Various topics fit under the theme of cultural interaction. Some examples are:

- the growth and development of religions
- the formation and spread of other belief systems and philosophies
- the ideas of science and technology and how they move across cultures
- artistic influences in painting, music, architecture, literature, and other arts

3. Political Structures

A second key theme is the creation of political systems and forms of government. World history has often been presented as a series of one ruler or government after another. It is much more complex than that. Governments, and their rulers or leaders, are influenced by those that come before them.

This engraving depicts the execution by guillotine of King Louis XVI of France, during the French Revolution. The French Revolution is one example of a change in political structures, during which France transitioned from a monarchy to a republic.
The French Revolution in 1789 was a consequence of hundreds of years of monarchy and, more specifically, a direct reaction to the decadent reign of Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette. After abolishing the monarchy and imprisoning the king, revolutionaries created a new, democratic government. This governing body, the National Assembly, proclaimed that they would protect the rights of every man, not just the monarch, saying:

Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes.

-Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, 1789

Political structures are an important aspect of history and a key element in the growth of civilization. The way in which people have organized and governed themselves says a great deal about human society. Society in a country ruled by a dictator may be very different than one in a democratic nation.

Various topics fall under the theme of political structures. Here are some examples:

- forms of government
- the nature and growth of empires, large territories controlled by a single ruler or state
- the development of nation-states
- political revolts and revolutions
- regional or global organizations, such as the European Union and the United Nations

4. Economic Structures

The way in which societies organize their economies is another important theme. Economic motives lie at the heart of many human activities, from the quest for food to the pursuit of wealth. Economic factors have played a critical role in history, driving people and societies to innovate, explore, and expand.
At the end of the 19th century, an American economist named Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe how people bought expensive goods, such as these luxury cars, as a way to display their wealth.

At the same time, economic interests have also been a source of great conflict. Many European rulers sent explorers abroad in search of gold, spices, and other sources of wealth. Although this meant that Europeans would accumulate wealth, it often meant that populations where these supplies were found were left without. Their goods were stolen, and they were often conquered and forced to work for Europeans. This unequal exchange has left lasting consequences that can still be seen today.

Economic interests have also led to and impacted war. From the invention of guns to armored tanks, financial investments in new technologies have changed the way humans fight with each other. The way wealth is distributed has also often meant that some people do not have enough money to support themselves. This disparity can impact political revolutions and rebellions, such as the Russian Revolution in 1917. A lack of food prompted riots in Russia, where many people
were both extremely poor and frustrated with corruption. By the end of the revolution, and the ensuing civil war, Russia installed a new communist government, which had sweeping power over the economy.

This theme covers a wide range of topics. Some examples are:

- the birth of agriculture and the expansion of trade
- how labor is organized and used
- the rise of industry
- the impact of economics on war and warfare
- the development of economic theories that have had a major impact on people and events around the world
- how technology and science increase global connections and globalization

5. Social Structures

The organization of societies is also a key theme. In prehistoric times, people formed social groups to meet their need for food, shelter, and security. Over time, these social groups banded together to form societies. By coming together, these groups were more capable of meeting their needs than they had been as individuals. Each society developed its own rules and customs to govern behavior within the society and help it function.
Jane Austen was an English novelist whose books were published in the early 1800s. Her writing offers modern audiences insight into the roles of class and gender in British society during the late 1700s.

Societies developed in different places, creating distinct cultures with many differences. One such difference is how different cultures recognize gender and the roles they assign to a specific gender. For example, most Western societies developed a social structure that acknowledged only two genders: male and female. Other parts of the world have or have had different gender systems. Parts of South Asia, for instance, recognize third genders, including one known as hijra. Hijras do not fit into Western understandings of male or female, but instead have a different gender entirely.

Although these social structures vary from culture to culture, they also had many things in common. Women in many places traditionally take the surname of their husbands when they marry men. In many societies, people also treat ethnic and racial minorities less favorably than they do the dominant racial or ethnic group. By examining and comparing social structures throughout history, we can get a
better understanding of human life.

Among the topics covered by this theme are:

- **gender roles** and relations, including the place of women in society
- customs relating to family and kinship
- racial and ethnic differences and their impact on society
- division of society into social and economic classes

### 6. Human-Environment Interaction

The interaction between humans and the environment is the fifth theme. The environment has been a key factor in human activity throughout history. The fact that people have to operate within the limits of the natural world has helped shape their actions. It has affected how and where people live and how they support themselves.

For example, the earliest civilizations emerged near larger river systems. These rivers created fertile lands that allowed people to settle in one place and build farms and raise livestock. As more people settled near these fertile environments, cities began to emerge and, later, civilizations. In this way, the environment shaped the course of human history.

Environment has also shaped how people live and work. People who live near the ocean historically could rely on fishing for work, while people who live far away from bodies of water could not. At the same time, human actions have also changed the environment in many ways. Overfishing is a concern in coastal environments because people in these communities rely on fishing for work.

This theme covers topics such as:

- disease
- population growth
- migration
- patterns of human settlement
- human activity

These factors can reflect or influence conditions in the environment. Many habitats have been destroyed in areas that experienced rapid population growth, as land was turned into both farms and housing. Habitat destruction has harmful
effects on both the environment and on humans, such as the extinction of native animal species from a region. People who rely on these species may be unable to work or live the same lifestyle after the animals go extinct.

Another topic is the environmental impact of technology, a major concern today because of energy use and climate change. Technology is not just a new concern. Throughout history—from the birth of farming to the creation of factories—the use of technology has affected the environment. By changing how we interact with the natural world, technology has had a major impact on the course of history.

The introduction of large-scale factories during the 1800s changed how people worked and what people were able to consume, both of which had large-scale effects on the environment. This engraving of a German factory shows the large amounts of pollution that industrialization created.

In this program, these five themes will serve as your guide to interpreting the long and complex history of human existence. These themes can be examined individually, as we did in this lesson. However, world history often requires us to look at all of the themes together in order to get a clearer view of what happened during these events.
Consider the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This movement was motivated in part by a social structure that discriminated against African Americans. After slavery was abolished, there were no systems in place for African Americans to have access to jobs and education. This led to many former slaves working as sharecroppers, a system of farming that kept farmers in perpetual debt to the land owner, giving them very little chance to socially advance. This social structure affected the human-environment interaction. Another motivation for the Civil Rights Movement stemmed from African American participation in WWII. With over one million African Americans having served in the war effort, many felt that they should have increased rights and protections. These are some factors that motivated the Civil Rights Movement.

The movement itself was an attempt to overhaul a political structure that discriminated against African Americans. One demand was that all African Americans be fully employed, which changed how the government oversaw the economic structure of the United States. The Civil Rights Movement also encouraged cultural interaction. Writers like James Baldwin told difficult, personal stories describing what it was like to be black in America. Artwork was also created in response to the movement.

By examining these themes together, we better understand the full weight of the Civil Rights Movement and how it affects us today. We can also examine similarities between events that take place in different eras or in different parts of the world.

Summary

In this lesson, you learned about some of the concepts and themes used in the study of world history.

A “Big-Picture” Approach  World history can be approached in various ways. The traditional approach focuses on the history of Western civilization. A second approach looks at the diversity of world regions. History Alive! World Connections takes a “big picture” approach that seeks to make connections among cultures and regions and identify patterns in history. It examines historical events in a cross-regional and global context.

How Historians Work  Historians seek to answer questions about the past. They make use of key concepts, such as time periods and spatial frames, to help
them organize information and make connections. They also apply certain habits of mind to analyze history. They look for links between events in different times and places and make comparisons within and among societies. They also evaluate universal standards in cultural and historical context.

**A Thematic Approach**  Applying themes to the study of history can help reveal patterns in historical events. This text highlights five themes. It examines the interaction of cultures around the world. It looks at political, economic, and social structures throughout history. And it considers the nature and impact of human interaction with the environment.