Defining Global Interconnectedness: The Central Role of the Medieval Middle East in Afro-Eurasian Networks

Hyunhee Park

CUNY John Jay College and the Graduate Center

Recent years have seen a growing trend in medieval studies that focuses on broader units of analysis, transcending national or regional boundaries. This shift is particularly relevant for the study of the medieval Middle East, which played a pivotal role in the interconnected networks of broader Afro-Eurasia. An increase in publications has underscored the significance of both the overland route, such as the Silk Road, and the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean, which flourished throughout the Middle Ages and facilitated consequential cross-cultural exchanges.[1] As a scholar initially trained in East Asian studies and later expanding my research scope and methods to include the Middle East, I have sought to highlight the centrality of the Middle East in these networks, drawing on interdisciplinary research and collaboration with Middle Eastern studies experts to ensure a nuanced and comprehensive analysis.

Many merchants and travelers from the Middle East played a dominant role in these trade networks, reaching all the way to East Asia.[2] A variety of sources, including archaeological excavations, testify to the significant presence of Arabs, Persians, and other Middle Easterners in China and the significant Islamization in areas such as Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region.[3] The Mongol Empire, encompassing Iran and China as

1. Due to space constraints, an exhaustive list of the numerous works on these topics cannot be provided here. For insights into the intricate connections between Asia and the Middle East via the Indian Ocean, refer to K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-cultural Exchange in Pre-modern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2. George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, rev. and ed. John Carswell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

3. John W. Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750-1400* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Geoff Wade, "Early Muslim Expansion in South-East Asia, Eighth to Fifteenth Centuries," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 3., *The Eastern Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. David Morgan and Anthony Reid, 366–408 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

close allies among the four Mongol Khanates, forged unprecedented connections between these regions, bringing significant changes that can only be examined from transnational perspectives.[4] But can we call this "global"?

The term "global" conjures images of a fully interconnected world, which might seem anachronistic when applied to the medieval era. In the past, many scholars and others have been reluctant to use the global label. This has recently changed quite dramatically with the growth and institutionalization of global history as a significant sub-field in the history discipline, driven by broader cross-cultural, comparative, and *global* approaches.[5] The discussion has been active regarding definition, scope, and research methodology. Several works have now tried to reflect critically on the issues that arise in the establishment of a new academic discipline. For example, Geraldine Heng's *The Global Middle Ages* explores both the significant advantages of, and contentious issues in, advancing early global studies. According to Heng, studying historical global interconnectivity highlights distinct and diverse forms of globalization across different eras, emphasizing that globalization did not begin solely with Western colonialism.[6]

Several impactful works have attempted to theorize connections in Afro-Eurasia during the medieval period, building on existing studies of the world's interconnectivity as forms of globality. For example, Janet L. Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony* argues that between 1250 and 1350 a commercial network encompassing a wide range of economic centers from Europe to China, known as the "thirteenth-century world system," emerged, forming the basis of the modern sixteenth-century world system. In this system, the Middle East, broadly defined, comprises several major centers in Western Eurasia.[7] Valerie Hansen, in her new book *The Year 1000*, argues that similar connections, including those involving the Middle East, existed earlier, around the year 1000, and even suggests that the Americas were also connected to Afro-Eurasia around this time by some explorers, proposing "real" global-scale connections, albeit to a limited degree.[8]

If we can be flexible in using the term "global" to refer to the world's interconnectivity as forms of globality, or as globalism based on extensive networks of exchange and communication across diverse cultures and regions, many more studies provide evidence to prove this "global" characteristic of the Middle Ages. I have argued that medieval geographers and cartographers in the Middle East depicted a world that extended far beyond their immediate environment, theorizing the Indian Ocean and the wider world,

4. Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. The establishment of organizations such as the World History Association in the early 1980s, the subsequent launch of the *Journal of World History* in 1990, and numerous publications with the "global history" label in the 2000s exemplify this growth.

6. Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 38–40.

7. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

8. Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

and providing detailed information about distant societies such as China.[9] While inheriting Greco-Roman geographical knowledge of the world, they also updated it based on newly accumulated details of different regions traveled by sailors. Middle Eastern travelers shared their information about the East, including China, through merchants' reports and lore found in numerous Arabic and Persian texts from the late ninth to the early fifteenth centuries, significantly contributing to the world's understanding of distant lands.

The Chinese were also stimulated by international commerce and became more involved in long-distance trade through these flourishing interactions. Geographers envisioned sailing routes to the countries in the Middle East over the Indian Ocean, which match those in contemporaneous Muslim geographic works. Chinese works considered the richest foreign countries, the ones with many valuable goods (*baohuo*), to be in the Middle East. Tombs testify to a significant Muslim presence in Quanzhou (Zaytun in western sources) and other cities, with a period of particular prosperity under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. During this period, a significant number of Chinese had close contacts within these Muslim communities, and some even traveled all the way to the Middle East. This legacy led to subsequent connections, including the unprecedented maritime expeditions of the early fifteenth century led by Admiral Zheng He, a descendant of Muslims, and aided by Muslim sailors who fulfilled the pilgrimage to Mecca during these journeys. Muslims in China continued to evolve into a distinct ethnic group, a process that would lead to the formation of the Hui people of modern-day China.[10]

The Mongol Empire, spanning from the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries, played a crucial role in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges across Afro-Eurasia and needs to be highlighted more for its role in promoting globalism in the Middle Ages. A growing number of studies on sources scattered in various languages through the vast expanse of the Mongol Empire, which at its height stretched from Eastern Europe to East Asia, have revealed unprecedented levels of interaction between diverse cultures and societies, with the Middle East being a crucial hub. This vast network of interconnected territories enabled the flow of goods, ideas, and people across regions, significantly influencing the cultural and intellectual landscapes of the medieval world.[11] Chinese governmental sources record that West Asian scholars and merchants introduced geographical treatises and maps to the Mongol court in China and contributed greatly to the creation of world maps including Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe for the first time in East Asia.[12] Rashīd al-Dīn presented a world history including China based on sources directly brought from China to the Mongol regime in Iran. Although not a merchant, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa recorded what he learned during his long travels through contacts with the Kārimī merchants and the

9. Hyunhee Park, "Open Space and Flexible Borders: Theorizing Maritime Space through Premodern Sino-Islamic Connections," in *The Maritime Silk Road: Global Connectivity, Regional Nodes, Materiality*, ed. Franck Billé, Sanjyot Mehendale, and James Lankton, 45–69 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

10. Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds*.

11. For the most recent collected volumes on the Mongol empire, see Timothy May and Michael Hope, eds., *The Mongol World* (New York: Routledge, 2022), and Michal Biran and Hodong Kim, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

12. Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds*, chapter 4.

networks of the Kāzarūniyya order of Sufis, who had established trading hubs along sailing routes, fostering the growth of Muslim communities throughout coastal India and maritime Southeast Asia.[13] A number of studies have provided detailed analyses of the transmission of information about geography, food, medicine, and other types of knowledge across the Indian Ocean basin. For example, Paul Buell argues that significant Arabic medical knowledge was transferred to China via Indian Ocean maritime routes, with the Mongol period being particularly significant.[14]

Some may argue that those not directly engaged in trade or not located along such routes did not know about the wider world for much of the medieval era. However, even in the modern era, with advanced transportation and high-speed internet, not everyone is fully aware of the entire world. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, increasing numbers of people became exposed to new information about the wider world through travelers' reports and systematic geographic accounts and maps. Scholars have shown that while locals may not have fully recognized the extent of these exchanges, they nonetheless benefited from the economic and cultural prosperity these interactions brought to their societies. For example, while historians of China have noted a commercial revolution from 600 to 1400 due to internal factors like improved agricultural technologies, Billy So's book *Prosperity, Region, and Institutions in Maritime China* emphasizes the significant, yet often neglected, impact of foreign trade on Quanzhou, including the export of Chinese porcelains to the Middle East during this period.[15]

Redefining the global Middle Ages to highlight the vibrant exchanges between the medieval Middle East, East Asia, and the wider world challenges traditional Eurocentric narratives and enriches our understanding of the period. This broader perspective not only emphasizes the pivotal contributions of the Middle East to premodern global history but also reveals the complex web of connections that defined the medieval world. This expanded view also helps dismantle the silos of regional history that have marginalized the contributions of non-Western societies and fosters a more equitable understanding of history that values the roles played by all groups in shaping our collective past. New scholarship is exploring the diversity of peoples who moved, crossing borders and contributing to transfers of cultural ideas in the medieval period. For example, Kristina Richardson's *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World* investigates the experiences of a West Asian group known as the Ghurabāʾ ("Strangers") who traversed Afro-Eurasia from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries.[16] Richardson provides a tantalizing suggestion that these groups

13. Ralph Kauz, "A Kāzarūnī Network?," *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, ed. Ralph Kauz, 61–69 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

14. Paul D. Buell and Eugene N. Anderson, *Arabic Medicine in China: Tradition, Innovation, and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); see also my monograph on the transmission of distillation and the Middle Eastern distilled liquor arak to China through maritime routes by the time of the Mongol period: Hyunhee Park, *Soju: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

15. Billy K. L. So, *Prosperity, Region, and Institutions in Maritime China: The South Fukien Pattern, 946–1368* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000).

16. Kristina Richardson, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022).

migrating from Ottoman territories to Bavaria and Bohemia in the early fifteenth century might have introduced printing technology to the Holy Roman Empire, highlighting their potential influence on European technological advancements. This kind of finding is only available when efforts to go beyond regional boundaries are made actively. Collaborative projects, such as the new series *Global Histories Before Globalisation* by Routledge and *The Medieval World* by Bloomsbury, promise to further break down silos and illuminate the diverse peoples and dynamic exchanges that shaped the medieval world.

Ultimately, the study of the global Middle Ages is not just an academic exercise; it has profound implications for how we understand cultural exchange and interaction today. By redefining the global Middle Ages to highlight the significant role of the Middle East, we challenge traditional Europe-centered narratives and enrich our understanding of this period. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of our historical roots equips us to appreciate the rich tapestry of global culture that has influenced contemporary society. Integrating this new perspective into history and culture education can lead to a more inclusive and diverse curriculum, bringing non-Western narratives to the forefront. Such an approach not only broadens our educational scope but also fosters a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of world history.