

## SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF EVENTS AND PEOPLE IN WORLD HISTORY ACROSS 12 CULTURES

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Social representations of world history were assessed using the open-ended questions, "What are the most important events in world history?" and "Who are the most influential persons in world history in the last 1,000 years?" Data from six Asian and six Western samples showed cross-cultural consensus. Historical representations were (a) focused on the recent past, (b) centered around politics and war, and (c) dominated by the events of the World Wars and (d) the individual Hitler, who was universally perceived as negative. (e) Representations were more Eurocentric than ethnocentric. (f) The importance of economics and science was underrepresented. (g) Most cultures nominated people (more than events) idiosyncratic to their own culture. These data reflect power relations in the world and provide resources and constraints for the conduct of international relations. The degree of cross-cultural consensus suggests that hybridity across Eastern and Western cultures in the representation of knowledge may be underestimated.

**Keywords:** collective remembering; globalization; social representations; ethnocentrism; Eurocentrism; ingroup favoritism

**In this rapidly globalizing world**, is there a shared representation of history, or do different regions and nations construct the history of the world in a different way? Shared representations (Moscovici, 1988) facilitate effective communication and coordination of behavior (Lau, Chiu, & Lee, 2001; Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2002), whereas differences in representation can become the basis for miscommunication and mistrust (Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004; Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999). Social representations of history allow present conflicts and challenges to be examined through the perspective or perspectives of what has passed (Devine-Wright, *in press*; Liu & Hilton, *in press*; Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997). Following Malinowski (1926), history provides “foundational myths” that can be used to construct a basis for legitimizing social order in society. Are there representations of history so widely shared across cultures that they might be used to construct a foundational myth for world order? And if so, what might its content be? Alternatively, there may be differences in the representation of history that could be implicated in a “clash of cultures” as posited by Huntington (1996). If so, what alternative world order (or disorder) would such representations support?

Socially shared representations of history are the cornerstone in Liu and Hilton’s (*in press*) framework for establishing a diachronic perspective on intergroup and international relations. In this framework, the passage of time transforms the historical experience of groups into shared meanings that act as resources and constraints for social identity and political action. Historical representations provide resources that can be mobilized by leaders to legitimize their political agenda. They also provide limitations in determining what is acceptable and unacceptable conduct by one group in the eyes of others. George Bush’s response to the events of September 11 provides a graphic illustration that historical events can become part of a legitimizing ideology for political action. The muted response of Germany to the United States’s call for military action in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrates the second point, showing how a nation’s actions in the past (World War II) may limit its willingness and ability to participate in military action today (Dresler-Hawke & Liu, *under review*).

The preceding examples illustrate how differences in historical representations shape social identity and the political actions different groups take. This “differences perspective” has become a central tenet of cross-cultural psychology, which has shown that many psychological processes operate differently, depending on the cultural worldviews subscribed to by a particular group (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Some cross-cultural psychologists believe that these differences can be described as locations along an abstract dimension like individualism-collectivism (e.g., Triandis, 1994). Others believe that each culture must be depicted in its own terms, using indigenous psychological constructs (e.g., Yang, 2000). Regardless of their position on this issue (for an excellent discussion, see “Indigenous, Cultural, and Cross-Cultural Psychologies” 2000), substantial universality in the construction of world history across cultures would come as a surprise to most culture-oriented psychologists.

At present, Asian and Western societies are strongly differentiated in the psychological literature in terms of individualism and collectivism. Hence, there may be “Asian” versus “Western” constructions of history as well. Given the shared cultural roots of many East Asian and Southeast Asian nations, a construction of history as emanating from ancient China and producing a story of “the advance of civilization” through the ages is not implausi-

ble. Such a finding, of civilization-level variation in the construction of history, would lend support to Huntington's (1996) idea of a clash of civilizations, where Sinic and Japanese civilizations are supposed to have fundamental differences with Western civilization.

But given the phenomenon of globalization (see Hermans & Kempen, 1998), with its flows of people, capital, technology, and mass communication, should we not expect a sharing of knowledge representations as well? Consider that the very topic of the history of the world is made possible only by gradual increases in trade, colonization, and eventually globalization. In this historical process, not all cultures have been equal, especially not in the past few hundred years. It was Western civilization that colonized the rest of the world from the 15th through the 20th centuries, and as a consequence, it is Western civilization that controls most of the world's capital, technology, and mass media. This unequal division of power makes a simple thesis of cultural differences seem naïve in the domain of knowledge production and representation (see Adair, Coelho, & Luna, 2002, for example).

Social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984, 1988), which is concerned with the processes and structures that enable knowledge and beliefs in society to be shared, has been used less extensively in cross-cultural psychology than might be expected given the centrality of globalization in our age. And social representations theorists have been slower to use the theory in a global context than might be expected (but see the work of Doise and colleagues, e.g., Doise, Spini, & Clemence, 1999, for an important exception). When different groups of people represent things in the same way, it not only provides the foundation for the successful communication and coordination of action, but what is shared is often taken for granted. Social constructions that are universally shared are treated as reality. They are hardly ever the source of contention; Moscovici (1988) refers to these as "hegemonic representations" and details how societal institutions propagate such knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Previous research by Liu (1999) used two questions: "Write down the names of the 5 people born in the last 1,000 years whom you consider to have had the most impact, good or bad, on world history," and "Imagine that you were giving a seminar on world history. What 7 events would you teach as the most important in world history?" to elicit open-ended responses about the representation of world history in four cultures. Setting aside, for the time being, the question of how social representations of history might be constructed as a narrative process involving dialogue between people, texts, and institutions (Wertsch, 2002), and using these two questions as a starting point, it was found that social representations of history centered around conflict.

In Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong, by far the largest category of events nominated in open-ended questions as the most important in world history concerned war. Together, politics and war accounted for about 70% of the events named as the most important in world history, and about 60% of the individuals named as the most influential. More specific, World War II was the most frequently named event in all four locations, and Hitler was the most frequently named individual in three of the four locations. Furthermore, the vast majority of events and people named were from the past 100 years, and for the most part, they hailed from Europe.

If these findings hold up under a broader sampling of peoples and cultures, then this would make a preliminary statement about what baseline information from the past goes into the computation of international and intergroup relations in the present. It would say a great deal about humanity if, across cultures, warfare is popularly remembered as history more than economics, discoveries, natural disasters, or scientific progress. Such data would suggest that to know a people's recent behavior in war and politics would be to know the essentials about their history. Issues relevant to conflict, like security, would take precedence in

the international arena over issues like economic prosperity or scientific advances. So far as these views are shared, we might expect all nations to behave in the same way (e.g., Machiavellian).

Furthermore, if history provides resources and constraints on intergroup behavior, as Liu and Hilton (in press) argue, Eurocentric representations focused on the recent past would provide a privileged position for the victorious Western powers in World War II to take action in the international arena in a way that is perceived as legitimate, relative to other nations.

To summarize, previous research by Liu (1999) using four societies indicated that social representations of history were consensual in several ways. They were (a) focused on the near rather than distant past, (b) dominated by the events of the World Wars, and (c) dominated by the individual Hitler, who was universally perceived as negative. Furthermore, biases in the naming of events and people to constitute world history tended to be (d) Eurocentric (i.e., about people and events that occurred in Europe) more than ethnocentric, and (e) about politics and war. (f) The evolution of science, technology, and commerce, which are arguably central to the actual movements of history (Kennedy, 1987), was severely underestimated.

The purpose of this research is to report a more comprehensive survey of the social representation of history from eight new nations in addition to a reanalysis of the four locations reported in 1999. With data from Britain, France, Germany, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, we can make a stronger statement about the generality of the preliminary tendencies reported in 1999. In particular, the thesis of cultural differences versus consensus can be tested on a sample of six (East and Southeast) Asian and six Western societies.

## METHOD

We focused our attention on the university educated. While further research might examine more representative samples, this population was chosen because they most closely reflect institutional tendencies (i.e., educational practices) rather than personal experiences. We especially wanted to examine the institutional propagation of knowledge through official channels as the first step in studying social representations of world history.

University students were recruited from 11 locations, and a student population plus a general sample were collected in one location. Little difference was detected between the general and student samples in Taiwan, and so these data were aggregated for most analyses (more to be said later). Portions of the data from Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, and New Zealand were reported in a preliminary investigation (Liu, 1999) and reanalyzed using an improved coding scheme.

*Sample characteristics.* Locations and number of participants were as follows: Australia,  $N = 102$  (77 women and 25 men); France,  $N = 102$  (52 women and 50 men); Germany,  $N = 81$  (41 women and 40 men); Great Britain,  $N = 39$  (34 women, 4 men, 1 gender unknown); Hong Kong,  $N = 123$  (61 women and 62 men); Japan,  $N = 91$  (38 women, 52 men, 1 gender unknown); Malaysia,  $N = 180$  (147 women and 33 men); New Zealand,  $N = 112$  (77 women and 35 men); Philippines,  $N = 302$  (212 women and 87 men); Singapore,  $N = 201$  (146 women and 55 men); Taiwan,  $N = 663$  (350 women and 313 men); and United States,  $N = 86$  (35 women and 51 men). Few differences were detected across gender in the samples where sufficient numbers of both were available, and so again these data were aggregated. The only

samples with substantial ethnic diversity were Singapore and Malaysia (both Chinese/Malay/Indian) and the Philippines (many local ethnic groups). The mean age of the student samples ranged from 19.7 to 24.1; the mean age of the Taiwanese sample was around 30. The Taiwanese general sample completed surveys in Chinese, whereas students completed surveys in the standard language of instruction used at the tertiary institution where the data were collected. English was used in Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Singapore. The first of the samples was collected in 1996 (New Zealand), and the last of them in 2002 (United States).

*Materials.* All participants completed a 3-page survey (not all questions in the survey are reported here). The first section contained demographic questions. The second section contained open-ended items to assess social representations of history. Here, the first question asked participants to “Write down the names of the 5 people born in the last 1,000 years whom you consider to have had the most impact, good or bad, on world history. When you are done, circle a number from 1-7 to indicate how much you admire each of them.” The scale endpoints ranged from *don’t admire at all* to *admire greatly*. A 1,000-year period was chosen to avoid an overreliance on religious figures. Participants were then asked, “Imagine that you were giving a seminar on world history. What 7 events would you teach as the most important in world history? How positively or negatively do you regard each event?” (on a 7-point scale ranging from *very negative* to *very positive*). Because of a clerical error, the Japanese participants were only asked to name 5 events. The questionnaires took 20 to 25 minutes to complete. The third section contained Likert-type scale items not reported here.

Lists of the 10 most important events in world history and 10 most important figures in world history were tallied for each of the 12 samples. Any participant who did not enter a single figure or event was deleted from the analysis. The average number of figures named was between 4.4 and 4.8 in the 12 samples (out of a maximum of 5). The average number of events named was between 5.3 and 6.2 (out of a maximum of 7) in 11 samples. In Japan, the mean was 4.0 out of a maximum of 5 because of the aforementioned clerical error.

*Coding scheme.* A list of the most important events in world history and the most important individuals in world history in the past 1,000 years was constructed during the process of analyzing the data reported in Liu (1999). With each new sample collected, new events and individuals were added to the list, and the coding scheme was slightly modified to accommodate the results. Both individuals and events were coded for “when,” “where,” and “why” using various historical textbooks and timetables.

Events were coded as having occurred and persons coded as having accomplished their most important deeds during the following periods: (a) prehistoric times (before 10,000 BC), (b) ancient history (10,000 to 1000 BC), (c) classical period part I (1000 BC to 500 AD), (d) classical period part II (500 to 1000 AD), (e) second millennium (1000 to 1600 AD), (f) 17th century (1600s), (g) 18th century (1700s), (h) 19th century (1800s), (i) 20th century (1900s), and (j) no time period classifiable. The small number of 21st-century events given by the American sample were classified as miscellaneous.

Events were also coded for where they occurred, and persons for where they were from according to the following system: (a) Europe (including Russia), (b) North America (United States & Canada), (c) Latin America (including Mexico, Central America, and South America), (d) Africa (including Egypt), (e) Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), (f) the South Pacific (including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines), (g) the Middle East (including Israel and Turkey), (h) the Indian subcontinent (including Myanmar,

Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), (i) the Far East (including Vietnam and Thailand), and (j) no specific region classifiable or more than one region.

Events were coded into one of the following categories: (a) war; (b) political events other than war; (c) scientific and technological achievements; (d) disasters; (e) discovery, exploration, and colonization; (f) economic issues; (g) births, deaths, and lives of individuals; (h) recurring events or eras; and (i) miscellaneous. The category of economic issues was added and treaties and peacemaking removed following content analysis of several samples (cf. Liu, 1999) to better reflect the actual distribution of events named.

Individuals were coded into up to two of the following categories: (a) wartime achievements; (b) political leadership not primarily about war; (c) scientific and technological achievements; (d) arts, literature, music, philosophy, and other theoretical advances; (e) discoveries, exploration, and colonization; (f) humanitarian work; (g) spiritual leadership; (h) athletics, dance, and physical beauty; and (i) miscellaneous.

During the initial phase of analysis, more than 160 events and 180 individuals were compiled on the master list, and more events and individuals were coded as relevant to specific samples. Where there were questions about the coding, the first author's judgment was final. All subsequent coders referred to the master list in coding data. Some inconsistencies and errors in the coding of events and people reported in Liu (1999) were corrected (e.g., in the New Zealand sample reported in 1999, World War II was coded as a European rather than global event). Because previous research (Liu, 1999) indicated that historical perceptions as individual differences measures were uncorrelated with individual differences in political preferences or social identity, we focus here entirely on what is shared and not shared.

## RESULTS

*Most important events in world history.* There was considerable cross-cultural consensus in what were considered as the most important events in world history. In every one of the 12 samples (see Table 1), World War II was named most frequently. In most samples, World War I was nominated second most frequently. The World Wars were so dominant that whereas World War II was named by more than 50% in every sample, and World War I in 10 of 12, no other event topped 50% in any sample. In addition, the dropping of the atomic bomb that ended World War II was also nominated among the top 10 in half the samples, and the Holocaust and/or Nazism was named in 3 samples.

One of the legacies of the Second World War, the Cold War, also received considerable cross-cultural support. A collection of issues including German Reunification (also described as the Fall of the Berlin Wall, nominated in five samples), the break-up of the Soviet Union (four samples), and the Cold War (three samples) all signaled the importance of the rivalry between the Soviet block and the Western block following World War II.

Besides the World Wars, the two individual events to receive the most cross-cultural consensus in nomination were the Industrial Revolution (8 of 12 samples) and the French Revolution (8 of 12). The Industrial Revolution is notable in that (besides the Depression) it is the only event that primarily concerned economics. The French Revolution and American independence (4 samples) emphasize the importance of the emergence of democracy.

The discovery of the Americas and putting a man on the moon (which included other forms of space travel) were the two most important events with regard to discovery and exploration, each named in six samples.

TABLE 1  
Most Important Events in World History

Rank	Japan (N = 75)	Taiwan (N = 646)	Hong Kong (N = 119)	Singapore (N = 196)	%
1	WWII	WWII	WWII	WWII	94
2	WWI	WWI	WWI	WWI	84
3	French Revolution	man on the moon	Tien An Men	Gulf War	32
4	Industrial Revolution	Industrial Revolution	Sino-Japanese War	Cold War	24
5	Vietnam War	American independence	USSR breakup	Great Depression	22
6	Cold War	discovery of Americas	Cultural Revolution	Industrial Revolution	19
7	Crusades	USSR breakup	German Reunification	Vietnam War	11
8	Atomic bombing	Crusades	Gulf War	USSR breakup	10
9	Discovery of Americas	Renaissance	American independence	rise of Communism	10
10	Korean War	French Revolution	French Revolution	French Revolution	9
	American independence			German Reunification	9

  

Rank	Australia (N = 98)	New Zealand (N = 107)	Philippines (N = 272)	Malaysia (N = 145)	%
1	WWII	WWII	WWII	WWII	60
2	WWI	WWI	WWI	WWI	60
3	Man on the moon	man on the moon	Gulf War	Industrial Revolution	28
4	Holocaust	women's suffrage	French Revolution	rise of Islam	23
5	Atomic bombing	birth of Christ	Industrial Revolution	atomic bombing	17
6	Industrial Revolution	Industrial Revolution	Nazism	Chinese history	14
7	Vietnam War	Roman Empire & fall	Renaissance	Islam vs. Christian wars	13
8	Discovery of Australia	German Reunification	people power (EDSA)	Opium War	12
9	Women's suffrage	discovery of Americas	atomic bombing	Renaissance	12
10	Birth of Christ	French Revolution	man on the moon	Japanese colonialism	11

(continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Rank	United States (N = 82)	%	Great Britain (N = 39)	%	France (N = 99)	%	Germany (N = 81)	%
1	WWII	86	WWII	77	WWII	64	WWII	68
2	WWI	50	WWI	64	French Revolution	54	WWI	60
3	American independence	38	Vietnam War	28	WWI	30	French Revolution	49
4	Sept. 11 terrorism	27	man on the moon	26	U.S. history	28	discovery of Americas	32
5	Discovery of Americas	26	birth of Christ	26	colonization	27	German Reunification	23
6	Vietnam War	20	Industrial Revolution	18	atomic bombing	20	Russian Revolution	23
7	American Civil War	20	discovery of Americas	18	German Reunification	19	Cold War	21
8	French Revolution	14	Roman Empire	18	man on the moon	16	Vietnam War	20
9	Birth of Christ	14	atomic bombing	15	decolonization	14	Crusades	15
10	USSR breakup	12	slavery	13	Nazism/Facism	12	colonialism	15
			Gulf War	13				



Besides the two World Wars, numerous other wars were nominated by more than one sample, including the Vietnam War (six samples), the Gulf War (five samples), the War of American Independence (four samples), and the Crusades (three samples). The presence of some minor wars like the Gulf War and Vietnam War alert us to the importance of recency and relevance to own group. The naming of the September 11 terrorism by the American sample, the only sample to be collected in the 21st century, and the Tien An Men Massacre in Hong Kong, collected just before the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to mainland China, alert us to the importance of recency in popular constructions of history.

The Renaissance (3 samples), the birth of Christ (4 samples), women's suffrage (2 samples), colonialism (3 samples), and the rise and fall of the Roman Empire (2 samples) were the only other events to be named by more than one sample among its Top 10.

Although the events overall were dominated by warfare, there was also some regional variation, with four singular events critical to the development of a people nominated by that people as important to world history. These were the Tien An Men Massacre by Hong Kong Chinese, the discovery of Australia by Australians, the people power (EDSA) revolution that toppled Marcos in the Philippines, and the American Civil War in the United States.

There was no overall tendency for East and Southeast Asian populations to present a view of history dichotomous to Western populations. Rather, some Asian populations, like Hong Kong Chinese, emphasized recent events in Chinese history (like the Cultural Revolution, Tien An Men, and the Sino-Japanese war), whereas others, like Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan, showed a strongly Western orientation in their views. Among all the events nominated in the Top 10 in Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan, the Korean and Vietnam Wars had the strongest regional emphasis. These events, like World War II, involved Western powers on Asian soil.

Malaysia, perhaps influenced by its large Chinese minority, named Chinese history and the Opium War. It is worth noting that as the only predominantly Muslim country in our study, Malaysia was also the only sample to name the rise of Islam and wars between Islam and Christianity among its Top 10. In fact, the Malaysian representation of history was the most idiosyncratic among the 12 samples, with an emphasis on Chinese, Islamic, and regional (Japanese colonization) events. Further research may well examine Muslim-Western differences rather than East-West differences in the representation of world history.

Looking more broadly at all of the events nominated (as seen in Table 2), however, whereas each region nominated significantly more local events, the overall pattern appeared to be more Eurocentric than ethnocentric. Europe never accounted for less than 29% of the events codable for region and averaged a robust 36% across the 12 samples.<sup>2</sup> Nonregional events (dominated by World War II) followed with an average of 26%. North America and the Far East both averaged 14%, whereas the other parts of the world all averaged less than 5% across the 12 samples.

These data suggest that Europe is currently considered as the center of world history and that the globalization of the world has taken place from a Eurocentric perspective. By contrast, some regions of the world with a long history of civilization were virtually ignored. For example, almost all the events to do with Africa concerned the ancient pharaohs of Egypt. None of the great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas were nominated. Our samples ignored the vast history of the Indian subcontinent and the discovery of the South Pacific by Polynesians.

The cause of this is the overwhelming preponderance of events from the past 100 years across all samples. The 20th century received the vast majority of the attention, accounting for between 56% and 79% of events (average of 63%). This lack of variability suggests that a

**TABLE 2**  
**Location of Important Historical Events (in percentages)**

<i>Location</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	
Europe	33	36	24	32	35	29	
North America	7	23	12	8	9	4	
Latin/South America					2		
Africa				2	2	2	
Australia & New Zealand							
Southeast Asia & Pacific	1			2	11	5	
Middle East	3	5	4	7	10	5	
Indian subcontinent				1	1	1	
Far East	23	16	41	14	8	22	
Not regional	33	19	19	34	24	29	

  

<i>Location</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>Average</i>
Europe	29	39	42	49	37	38	36
North America	31	14	11	15	13	17	14
Latin/South America		2	1				0
Africa	1	4	4		4	3	2
Australia & New Zealand					8	9	1
Southeast Asia & Pacific					1	1	2
Middle East	6	7	5	6	5	4	5
Indian subcontinent					1		0
Far East	8	8	7	5	8	5	14
Not regional	25	27	31	24	23	20	26

NOTE: Blanks refer to less than 1% nominations. Columns may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

focus on the recent past may well be characteristic of how educated young people construct world history at present. Outside of the 20th century, there was little consistency across cultures in how events were named across time. There was no tendency for events to decrease in a linear fashion from the 20th back to the 17th century.

The content of the events nominated centered around politics and war, with war preeminent (see Table 3). Each event was coded into a single category: War accounted for between 30% and 52% of the events (sample average = 41%) nominated across samples, and other political events accounted for between 16% and 38% (average = 26%).

By comparison, science and technology (7% average), eras (8%), exploration and colonization (7%), and economic issues (5%) were marginally represented, whereas disasters (2%), and birth and deaths of individuals (3%) were even less important.

Given some idiosyncrasy in the naming of events (especially those nominated only a few times), and the low frequency of nominations for events ranked between 6 and 10 in our smaller samples, we repeated the above analyses using only the Top 5 events in each sample. This exaggerated the tendencies reported previously, with the World Wars completely dominating events and producing even more extreme focus on the 20th century, Europe (and nonregional events), and war (followed by politics).

*Most important figures in the past 1,000 years.* Examining Table 4, in public perceptions, the most important figure in world history in the past 1,000 years is Adolph Hitler. Hitler was

**TABLE 3**  
**Content of Historical Events (in percentages)**

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	
War	52	41	41	45	34	47	
Other political	27	23	38	28	23	18	
Science & technology	6	16	8	4	8	5	
Disasters	3	2	3	2	2	0	
Exploration & colonization	5	5	1	3	5	5	
Economic issues	4	6	4	8	3	8	
Births & deaths	2	2	3	1	5	1	
Eras	1	6	3	7	15	17	
Miscellaneous	1	0	1	2	4	2	

  

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>Average</i>
War	39	45	30	39	37	38	41
Other political	29	16	26	33	24	27	26
Science & technology	6	13	6	3	5	4	7
Disasters	7	3	0	1	2	2	2
Exploration & colonization	6	4	10	9	12	13	7
Economic issues	4	3	4	4	3	4	5
Births & deaths	5	5	3	0	5	6	3
Eras	3	9	19	8	9	4	8
Miscellaneous	2	1	2	3	3	1	2

NOTE: Columns may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

the most frequently nominated individual in 11 of the 12 samples, with only Mao Zedong outranking him among Hong Kong Chinese. He was the only person to be nominated by more than 50% of any sample besides Mao and Sun by Hong Kong Chinese, and the only person in the top 10 of all 12 samples. Hitler's evaluation was universally negative: His evaluations ranged from 1.3 on a 7-point scale (*don't admire at all*) to 2.4.

Besides Hitler, there was a strong preponderance of other wartime leaders. The second most nominated wartime leader was Napoleon (8 of 12), followed by Mao (6 of 12, all 6 Asian samples) and Lincoln (6 of 12). The status of Mao Zedong as important among all of the Asian samples and none of the Western samples was the only evidence of an East-West dichotomy in historical representations. Winston Churchill, Hitler's arch foe, was nominated in 4 samples, Britain and her former colonies. Josef Stalin was nominated in 3 samples. Charles DeGaulle (France) and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Taiwan) were the other World War II figures nominated.

However, the individual with the most cross-cultural consensus after Hitler was not a wartime leader, but scientist Albert Einstein (every sample except Malaysia). India's spiritual and political leader Mahatma Gandhi was in the top 10 of 8 of the 12 samples. African American civil rights leader Martin Luther King was named by all 4 of the English-speaking populations, and Nelson Mandela was nominated by 4 samples as well (3 Anglophone populations plus France). Mother Teresa was the only woman named in more than one sample (4 samples), and Margaret Thatcher and Diana, Princess of Wales, were the only other women named by any sample (Britain, likely to be idiosyncratic nominations given the small sample

**TABLE 4**  
**Most Important World Figures in the Past 1,000 Years**

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Japan</i> (N = 78)		<i>Taiwan</i> (N = 663)		<i>Hong Kong</i> (N = 122)		<i>Singapore</i> (N = 196)	
		%		%		%		%
1	Hitler	54	Hitler	41	Mao	63	Hitler	77
2	Napoleon	26	Lincoln	26	Sun Yat-sen	58	Gandhi	42
3	Edison	19	Einstein	22	Hitler	49	Mao	32
4	Mao	15	Napoleon	22	Einstein	38	Churchill	20
5	Lincoln	15	F. D. Roosevelt	19	Deng Xiaoping	29	Saddam Hussain	17
6	N. Oda	14	Sun Yat-sen	19	Newton	17	Lee Kuan Yew	16
7	Kennedy	14	Edison	19	Napoleon	11	Mother Teresa	15
8	H. Toyotomi	13	Mao	17	Qin Emperor	9	Einstein	15
9	Einstein	10	Washington	16	Bill Clinton	9	Napoleon	11
10	Columbus	10	Jesus Christ	14	Edison	9	Stalin	11
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Australia</i> (N = 101)		<i>New Zealand</i> (N = 111)		<i>Phillippines</i> (N = 265)		<i>Malaysia</i> (N = 131)	
		%		%		%		%
1	Hitler	85	Hitler	88	Hitler	57	Hitler	44
2	Mandela	23	Einstein	36	Gandhi	38	Gandhi	27
3	Einstein	22	Gandhi	22	Jose Rizal	22	Mao	26
4	M. L. King	21	Napoleon	14	Einstein	22	Mohammed	19
5	Gandhi	19	Churchill	13	Mao	17	Marx	16
6	Kennedy	16	M. L. King	12	Mother Teresa	16	Lincoln	15
7	Captain Cook	15	Mandela	11	Andres Bonifacio	14	Stamford Raffles	13
8	Marx	14	Mother Teresa	11	Lincoln	13	T. Abdul-Rahman	12
9	Freud	12	Newton	10	Ferdinand Marcos	12	Sun Yat-sen	11
10	Churchill	11	Columbus	9	Marx	12	Mahathir	11
			Shakespeare	9				
			Thatcher	9				
<i>Rank</i>	<i>United States</i> (N = 85)		<i>Great Britain</i> (N = 40)		<i>France</i> (N = 100)		<i>Germany</i> (N = 69)	
		%		%		%		%
1	Hitler	79	Hitler	100	Hitler	86	Hitler	91
2	Gandhi	36	M. L. King	33	Napoleon	30	Napoleon	48
3	M. L. King	32	Churchill	30	De Gaulle	24	Martin Luther	33
4	Napoleon	22	Thatcher	23	Einstein	21	Gandhi	26
5	Columbus	16	Einstein	23	Gandhi	19	Einstein	22
6	Marx	15	Princess Diana	20	Columbus	18	Stalin	22
7	Lincoln	14	Mandela	20	Freud	18	Gorbachev	19
8	Washington	14	Mother Teresa	18	Mandela	15	Bismarck	17
9	Einstein	13	Saddam Hussein	18	Marx	14	Lincoln	16
10	Kennedy	12	Kennedy	13	Kennedy	14	Kennedy	16
	Stalin	12						

size). Besides Thatcher, these figures typically combined humanitarian or spiritual leadership with political effect.

Martin Luther (Germany) was the only leader to be nominated outside of the 20th century whose role (in the Protestant Reformation) was somewhat similar to that of modern civil rights leaders.

Jesus Christ (Taiwan), Mohammed (Malaysia), and the Qin Emperor (Hong Kong) were the only persons to be nominated outside the 1,000-year limit set in the question.

**TABLE 5**  
**Realms of Achievement for Important Historical Figures**  
**(in percentages)**

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	
Political	58	63	69	67	66	74	
Wartime	35	45	42	49	42	38	
Scientific	12	17	17	8	11	8	
Arts/Lit/Phil	5	9	8	7	15	11	
Humanitarian	1	8	4	18	11	7	
Spiritual	9	8	2	15	20	17	
Exploration	2	2	1	3	4	6	
Physical	2	0	1	2	3	0	

  

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>Average</i>
Political	73	71	64	76	58	57	67
Wartime	43	42	37	50	36	36	41
Scientific	5	14	18	8	18	19	12
Arts/Lit/Phil	12	8	14	13	16	14	11
Humanitarian	14	22	8	12	13	10	10
Spiritual	15	7	7	16	9	10	11
Exploration	4	2	5	2	5	5	3
Physical	1	0	1	0	1	2	1

NOTE: Columns do not total to 100% because figures were coded for two categories where appropriate.

Among social scientists, Marx was named in the top 10 in five samples. The only other scientists or social scientists named were Edison (three samples), Freud (France and Australia), and Newton (New Zealand).

Columbus (four samples) and Captain Cook (Australia) were the two explorers named in the Top 10.

The two artists named were Shakespeare (New Zealand) and Jose Rizal (Philippines). Rizal was a poet and a martyred political leader in the Philippines's struggle for independence from Spain.

Finally, John F. Kennedy was the most frequently nominated nonwartime political leader across cultures (six samples), followed by Sun Yat-sen (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, which has a substantial ethnic Chinese minority). Several nonwartime political leaders were nominated in only one sample, usually their country of origin (Gorbachev, Thatcher, Lee Kuan Yew, Marcos, Mahathir, Bill Clinton, Stamford Raffles, and Tunku Abdul Rahman). There was considerably more ontogenic focus (or focus on the creation of one's own group; see Liu et al., 1999) for nominations of people compared to events. Although there were only four singular ontogenic events nominated, every culture except New Zealand nominated at least one individual important to the creation of their own culture as central to world history that was not recognized by most of the other samples.

Biographies of history were consulted to provide guidelines for coding why each historical figure was nominated (see Table 5). Each historical figure was categorized into one or two categories. Overall, across samples, an average of 67% of the figures named could be classified as political leaders. Among these, more than 60% played significant roles during

wartime. The category of wartime leaders emerged as a subset of political leaders, as only a couple of persons nominated were purely professional soldiers (e.g., MacArthur).

There was little variation in this pattern of results. Across cultures, the leading characters in history were leaders in politics, most frequently the politics of war. Science was the third most frequent reason for historical fame. It was a stand-alone category with little cultural variation in frequency as well. There was greater cross-cultural variation in the categories of scientific, arts/literature/philosophy, and humanitarian achievement that was hard to interpret theoretically. For instance, Americans and Japanese (technological leaders) had only 5% of their nominations in the science category, compared with 18% and 19% for Australians and New Zealanders (technological followers).

The pattern of regional variation in the places where the people named was an exaggerated version of the pattern for events. European nations were overwhelmingly ethnocentric, with more than 75% of nominations from England, France, and Germany coming from Europe. Americans, New Zealanders, and Australians held less Eurocentric but equally Western-oriented representations. Americans were notably nationalistic, whereas New Zealanders and Australians were cautiously so. The data from Western nations show that Westerners have a strongly ethnocentric view where very few non-Westerners are considered to be important in world history (Westerners accounted for between 78% and 88% of persons nominated in the six Western samples).

Among Asian populations, Westerners accounted for close to 50% of the total nominations. Here, we find more ethnocentrism than in the events named, with Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong naming a large proportion of figures from the Far East, and the Philippines and Malaysia devoting a large percentage of their nominations to Southeast Asia, the Far East, and India. Singapore had the highest percentage of Westerners in their nominations among the six Asian samples (see Table 6).

Finally, there was an overwhelming preponderance of 20th-century figures. Sample means ranged from 48% (Japan) to 83% (Singapore), with an overall average of 72%. A multinomial analysis of variance (Woodward, Bonett, & Brecht, 1990) with a proportion of 20th-century events as the dependent variable and Sample  $\times$  Region (Asian vs. Western) as the independent variables revealed no significant differences between Asia and the West but, rather, more idiosyncratic sample-specific variations.

These figures amplify the results obtained for events: Popular representations of history focus on the recent rather than distant past. Unlike the results obtained for events, in most samples, 19th-century figures were the second most nominated group (8% to 31%, across sample averages of 16%). Between them, the past two centuries accounted for almost 90% of the figures named.

When these analyses were repeated using only the top five figures in each sample, the tendencies reported above (Eurocentrism, 20th-century focus, war, and politics) became even more pronounced. Hence, the main results reported above cannot be attributed to the idiosyncratic nature of small samples; rather, the main results are diluted by the idiosyncracies of smaller samples.

To underline the robust nature of these results, we conducted one final analysis using our largest and most representative sample, Taiwan. As can be seen in Table 7, men and women and students and members of the general population produced almost exactly the same tallies of historical events. Among the 11 events in the Top 10 for men and women tallied separately, chi-square tests indicated that only the Westward expansion of Mongolia differed significantly in proportions named by men and women. Similarly, among the 12 events in the Top 10 for students and members of the general population, chi-square tests indicated that

**TABLE 6**  
**Principal Region Where Figure Named Was From or Active in**  
**(in percentages)**

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Philippines</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	
Europe	37	31	37	48	44	33	
North America	21	21	11	14	13	10	
Latin/South America							1
Africa				1			2
Australia & New Zealand							
Southeast Asia & Pacific	2		1	4	18	21	
Middle East	2	3	1	5	5	9	
Indian subcontinent	1	2	1	10	14	8	
Far East	36	43	49	16	7	15	

  

<i>Event Type</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>Average</i>
Europe	46	75	76	77	61	65	52
North America	37	13	9	11	17	18	16
Latin/South America	1		2	1	1		
Africa	1	4	3	1	5	2	12
Australia & New Zealand					4	6	11
Southeast Asia & Pacific					2		10
Middle East	4	4	3	2	3		11
Indian subcontinent	9	2	5	7	4	7	
Far East	2	1	2	2	3	2	3

only the founding of the United Nations and the breakup of the USSR differed significantly in proportions named by younger and older adults. There was an indication that older adults viewed the end of the Cold War (breakup of USSR, German Reunification) as more important than did younger adults, although the latter event did not quite reach significance.

## DISCUSSION

Results from six (East and Southeast) Asian and six Western samples replicated and extended preliminary findings reported in Liu (1999). Across cultures, social representations of history were overwhelmingly about politics and war, and nominations were dominated by the recent past (the past century). The World Wars were by far and away the most important events in world history, and Hitler was the most influential individual. Although there was some ethnocentrism in the pattern of nominations, the overall pattern was more Eurocentric than ethnocentric, with events from North America plus Europe exceeding events from Asia, even for the six Asian samples. Nominations of important figures contained more East-West differences, with Westerners nominating about 80% to 90% Westerners, and Asians nominating about 40% to 60% Westerners. There were also more nominations of idiosyncratic individuals important to a particular culture as part of world history than there were for events.

**TABLE 7**  
**Most Important Events in World History by Gender and Age Group in Taiwan**

<i>Women (N = 335)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Men (N = 295)</i>	<i>%</i>
WWII	66	WWII	72
WWI	62	WWI	58
American independence	23	Man on the moon	27
Man on the moon	23	Industrial Revolution	22
Industrial Revolution	23	American independence	20
Discovery of Americas	20	Discovery of Americas	20
Renaissance	17	USSR breakup	19
Crusades	14	Crusades	16
USSR breakup	13	Renaissance	11
American Civil War	11	Mongolia expands West	11
<i>Students (N = 285)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>General Population (N = 272)</i>	<i>%</i>
WWII	68	WWII	69
WWI	60	WWI	59
American independence	25	Man on the moon	23
Discovery of Americas	21	Industrial Revolution	16
Industrial Revolution	21	USSR breakup	15
Man on the moon	20	American independence	15
Crusades	19	Discovery of Americas	15
Founding the UN	16	Crusades	14
Renaissance	16	Renaissance	13
American Civil War	15	German Reunification	11

Data suggest that historical representations are strongly globalized, with university-educated samples in East and Southeast Asia holding a view of history that emphasizes the effects of modernization and Westernization. The only evidence of a dichotomy between Asian and Western worldviews of history was in the position of Mao Zedong. He was considered as a central figure in all six of the Asian samples and none of the Western samples. Rather than a clash of civilizations between East and West, nominations were characterized by greater and lesser degrees of Eurocentrism. Western views of history were overwhelmingly ethnocentric, with only a few postcolonial non-Westerners, whose achievements were in humanitarian and spiritual realms rather than war (e.g., Gandhi, Mandela), considered as important. East and Southeast Asian views of history were also Eurocentric, only to a lesser degree. Probably the least Eurocentric representation was from Malaysia, the sole Muslim nation in our survey, giving food for further thought.

All samples, including Malaysia, saw world history as emanating from the West, with a plurality of events taking place in the West, acted out by Westerners. This was true for men and women, and for students and a general sample of adults in the one sample where they were both available, Taiwan. These results suggest that a hybridity and similarity in the content of knowledge may be far more central than suggested by much of the literature in cross-cultural psychology (see Hermans & Kempen, 1998). One reason for this is educational practices: In Taiwan and Japan, for example, world history and Chinese or Japanese history are taught as separate classes in high school. The national history is taught ethnocentrically, whereas world history is taught from a Eurocentric perspective (with own nation presented



largely as a passive onlooker). There is little interface between the two classes, and other Asian nations rarely feature in either account, except during World War II.

Following Liu and Hilton (in press), such representations of history can be used by Western powers to justify their political and military actions where they conflict with other groups. The defeat of the Axis nations was a cornerstone for the emergence of a bipolar world following World War II, with both the Soviet Union and the Western powers claiming legitimacy for their political worldviews based on their roles in the war. We argue that not only military and economic might but representational resources are part of the preeminence of Western powers in the world today (see Pittolo, 1996, for an example of how representations can be mobilized to justify actions). Conversely, Germany and Japan, as the biggest losers of World War II, suffer from the “burden of history” (Dresler-Hawke & Liu, under review). Their ability to act unilaterally in international relations, especially using military might, is far more limited than their economic and military power would suggest.

Two concurrent factors suggest that the representations reported here will become less hegemonic (or dominant) over time. First, data from studies on collective remembering (Pennebaker et al., 1997) suggest that there is a 50-year lifespan of critical historical events, after which they come to be reconsidered. A reevaluation of the Franco regime, for instance, is taking place in Spain today (Igartua & Paez, 1997); in our Taiwanese sample, the end of the Cold War was viewed as more important by the general population than by students. Second, with the events of September 11, 2001, and Chechnyan fighters in Moscow, the superpowers of the United States and Russia are claiming a mandate for a “new world order.” We speculate that current relevance is an important criterion that maintains the centrality of a historical representation over time, and so September 11, 2001, may rise in importance if conflict between Western and Middle Eastern nations continues. The aging and dying of populations and the overlaying of new events with political significance on top of older ones are both involved in the process of representational change (see Liu & Allen, 1999).

Given the overwhelming preponderance of war/conflict as the subject of history, however, we should anticipate that security issues will continue to dominate international political relations far more than other important concerns like scientific, economic, or humanitarian issues. The preeminence of war was particularly striking given (a) the predominantly female composition of our samples, and (b) the lack of gender differences in those samples where sufficiently large numbers of both men and women were available (France, Germany, Taiwan, and Hong Kong).

Serious questions remain about the generality and meaning of the results reported here. First, there are substantial differences between representations of history for scholars and lay persons. For instance, a ranking of the 100 most influential persons in history by Hart (1992) has Muhammad, Newton, Christ, Buddha, Confucius, St. Paul, Ts’ai Lun, Gutenberg, Columbus, and Einstein as its Top 10. Napoleon and Hitler are ranked 34th and 39th, respectively, and the first figure whose reputation is based largely on war is the Qin Emperor at #17. The lay persons answering our survey privileged the recent past and war far more than Hart. According to theories of collective remembering (Halbwachs, 1950/1980), these differences can be attributed to the distribution of memory for events based on a person’s social role. The job of professional historians is to act as repositories of collective memory for societies, whereas students have an obligation to learn what is being taught in school. Thinking causally about the deeper forces that shape history like science, religion, or the effect of the invention of paper and the printing press is generally not part of the *précis* of collective remembering for university students.

Although the broad outlines of the content of what they are learning in school seems to be similar across cultures, this may not be true of the meaning ascribed to the events. World War II may be seen as a “disaster” for Germany and Japan, as “their finest moment” for Great Britain, or as the “means for throwing off the yoke of colonial masters” in Singapore and Malaysia. The event at the broadest level is the same, but the narrative used to describe the event may take on the perspective of the national group. Wertsch (2002) argues that narratives are cultural tools that make it possible to “grasp together sets of temporally distributed events into interpretable wholes or plots” (p. 57). How the events named in our surveys are configured as narrative, a story with meaning, cannot be ascertained from the data collected. A different method, focusing on a single event (like World War II) in one or two countries (see Larsen & Laszlo, 1990; Liu et al., 2002; or Liu et al., 1999, for example), would be required. Better insight into the meaning of shared events in world history would allow us to state more definitively whether globalization is as our current data suggest, largely a matter of Western cultural imperialism, or whether there are multiple modernities hidden beneath the methodology employed here.

Besides probing deeper into the meaning of historical events and narratives that configure them, further research should also examine the effect of the eliciting questions used in this research. Did the 1,000-year time limit for persons enforce a recency effect on the data? Perhaps more important, did the framing of history as made up of events and persons elicit representations favoring discrete events like war and underestimating more diffuse happenings like the Industrial Revolution or the development of the Internet? We consider this article to have outlined a structure for lay representations of history across cultures. Whether this structure can act as a foundation under more varied methods of elicitation and deeper probes of meaning remains to be seen.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the functional relationship between historical representations and international relations is a fruitful area of interplay. Whereas Liu and Hilton (in press) and Devine-Wright (in press) have proposed frameworks to approach this issue, more data are available within nations using ethnic or religious groups as the topic (e.g., Devine-Wright, 2001; Liu et al., 2002; Liu et al., 1999) and less work examines the role of historical representations in international relations (but see Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Hilton, Erb, McDermott, & Molian, 1996). The current attempt by the United States to reposition itself following the events of September 11, 2001, as “Policeman of the World” rather than as World War II’s “Defender of the Free World” could be a useful site for such investigations. Understanding the roles that interpersonal communication and mass media play in propagating new historical representations *vis-à-vis* more established ones in the context of current events would enrich both social representations theory and the field of history and intergroup relations.

## NOTES

1. Departing from Durkheim’s “collective representations,” Moscovici also posits the existence of “polemical representations” that signal divided factions of opinion within society and “emancipated representations” that co-exist independent of one another.

2. Asian samples did name significantly fewer European events than did Western samples, however.

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