

World Historical Information
Summary of Fall 2021 Meetings
Patrick Manning, Ruth Mostern, Alexandra Straub
Summer 2022

During Fall 2021, the World History Center sponsored a series of meetings on the topic of World Historical Information (WHI) that included a total of twenty-three participants from twelve disciplines in ten countries. This document summarizes the wide-ranging conversations that took place at those meetings. Appendix A is a list of WHI research initiatives, tools, journals, and projects that participants mentioned during these meetings.

WHI is knowledge, presented in a structured format, that helps to answer questions of interest to scholars of the human past who seek to transcend the confines of nation states and other bounded spatial systems. WHI might take the form of databases, but it might also inhere in archives and catalogues themselves. Although new WHI projects are often born digital, older WHI projects may not have been. WHI might include microdata about individuals, aggregated information like price data, indexes such as those of court cases, or maps and gazetteers that collate spatial information. Creating WHI might involve numerous interpretive steps of aggregation and calculation. WHI corpora might exist at many temporal and spatial scales. Working with WHI very often involves questions about uncertainty, disagreement, missing values, data ethics, and challenges of classification.

Working with WHI permits promising inquiry into a wide range of topics such as wealth accumulation, pandemics, trade, migration, infrastructure, war and genocide, agriculture, and diplomacy, as well as to the topics listed in Appendix A. A wide range of tools and techniques make it possible to create and interpret WHI. Some promising new directions on the horizon involve data mining. Thesauruses support interoperability between collections of WHI that may refer in different ways to categories of information such as places, currencies and exchange rates, historical eras, or census data.

In addition to collective efforts to build thesauruses and to tackle domains of historical inquiry, participants had numerous suggestions about initiatives for institutionalizing WHI scholarship. These included:

- Developing standards for data, interoperability, and sustainability and identifying best practices for collaboration. Facilitating interoperation between historical datasets permits domain-specific projects to scale up to the breadth of WHI infrastructure. This area of activity would also entail planning for data curation, ontologies, and metadata standards adequate to cross-platform searches of disparate datasets.
- Supporting venues for publication of peer reviewed scholarship and data, including articles about standards and methods and articles that communicate quantitative articles for qualitative audiences, or vice versa. Historians and historical social scientists need to communicate with one another about how to work with the primary sources in which WHI is often embedded.

- Advocating for stable institutional repositories for data in complex formats that are not amenable to library accessioning, as well as for live applications, platforms, and tools. This area of activity would involve promoting institutional structures for hosting and sustaining large data projects that need long-term funding. Some large-scale projects will need licensing arrangements and opportunities for purchase by university libraries. Some will need planning that permits them to sunset without the loss of their content.
- Historians who want to begin using quantitative data need extensive training and education. This is a particular challenge given that there is little space for digital methods education in History Ph.D. programs. Potential users also need training. For instance, they need to learn how to write queries that make the most of large-scale repositories and they need to feel confident that data has been subjected to reliable third-party curation and review, even as it scales up to the scope of WHI. This area of activity would also include creative thinking about how to train users to be willing and able to reuse well-documented data created by other researchers.

Appendix A: World Historical Information Research Initiatives, Tools, Journals, and Projects
Introduced by Participants at Fall 2021 World History Center Meetings

Organizations and Collaborative Infrastructure

- [Centre for Research on Pandemics and Society \(PANSOC\)](#)
- [Collaborative for Historical Information and Analysis \(CHIA\)](#)
- [Harvard Dataverse](#)
- [Integrated Public Use Microdata Series \(IPUMS\)](#)
- [International Institute of Social History \(IISH\)](#)
- [Institute for Research on World-Systems \(IROWS\)](#)
- [Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research \(ICPSR\)](#)
- [World-Historical Dataverse](#)

Ongoing Projects

- [China Biographical Database Project](#) (Harvard University)
- [China Historical GIS](#) (Harvard University, Fudan University)
- [Climatological Database for the World's Oceans 1750-1850](#)
- [Federico-Tena World Trade Historical Database](#)
- [Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations](#) (IISH)
- [Living with Machines](#) (The Alan Turing Institute, the British Library, and the Universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, Exeter, and London)
- [MARKUS](#) (Digital Humanities Cluster at NTU)
- [Seshat: Global Historical Databank](#) (Seshat Databank)
- [SlaveVoyages](#) (Rice University)
- [World Historical Gazetteer](#) (University of Pittsburgh)

Journals

- [Cliodynamics](#)
- [Journal of Open Humanities Data](#) (JOHD)
- [Journal of World-Systems Research](#) (JWSR)