

Manners in Modern World History

There must be a certain tension in teaching world history between covering the staples—at the secondary level, often determined by test coverage—and using the subject as a framework for newer topics. A focus on manners in world history definitely falls in the latter category, though it flows from some of the basic interests in the field, particularly in the expansions and impacts of contacts among different regions—potentially in various time periods, but certainly in the modern era. Introducing students to the ways in which manners both reflect and cause changes in human interactions opens a promising new aspect of the field, which can also prompt discussions of manners in our own society, where comparisons open some intriguing questions. And if there are some international travelers in the student cohort, they can add in impressions of their own. What follows, then, is an effort to introduce a novel topic for world history teachers and researchers, one that can show students how the subject can be extended to additional dimensions of the human experience—beyond the constraints of the standard curriculum—and even encourage further exploration.

Explorations of the history of manners have become a flourishing cottage industry in European and North American history, generating a number of fruitful research projects and some vigorous, and still unresolved, debates.¹ The subject has not however been put into a global context—a few important comparative references aside—yet enough work has been done to suggest a larger project, beginning with the basic claim that, over the past century or more, manners have been changing substantially in almost every society, and for some common reasons. This essay sketches several of the patterns involved, while noting as well that manners remain a significant cultural variable—as contemporary global etiquette manuals earnestly advise. The goal is both to show how manners can be included in discussions of modern globalization, in research and in the classroom,² and to urge the opportunity for further comparative work on a revealing topic.

Some Preliminary Observations: From the Seemingly Trivial to Essential Considerations

Manners represent social guidelines that translate cultural values into practices that shape individual emotional and physical reactions. At their fullest, they combine prescriptions and actual behaviors, though the former are always the easier to trace. They also express and enforce hierarchies, though often in complex ways. Manners can, to be sure, be dismissed as rather trivial, and it is unquestionably possible to detail various prescriptions in a largely antiquarian fashion, without much analytical heft. At the global level, this temptation can show in the worthy lists of do's and don'ts for travelers, that can be entertaining (or intimidating) without delving very deeply into the values involved (and that often fail to keep pace with change).³ For example, many instructors (and travel guides) seeking to exemplify cultural differences, note that many gestures that in one culture are innocent or even inviting, but turn out to be obscene in another. These are intriguing and amusing, but they all express a common interest in defining certain hand or finger motions as beyond the pale save as deliberate insults; nothing too profound involved here, except that manners do some common work in most cultures but with highly varied manifestations.

However, as many historians have already demonstrated, particularly in work on patterns in the early modern and modern West, manners can also be surprisingly revealing about basic cultural assumptions concerning social hierarchies, appropriate hygiene, relations between genders and among age groups—assumptions to which many people are largely oblivious, schooled as they have been in key habits from a young age. Many contemporary Westerners for example, on both sides of the Atlantic, are unaware that they actually practice a rather complicated set of social rules. As Cas Wouters and others have argued, apparent informality masks a range of detailed prescriptions, many again instilled in childhood, which can actually seem quite daunting to outsiders.⁴ Thus Bo Yang, a Chinese essayist, noted in 1985: “When Chinese people first come to the United States, their biggest problem is the excessive politeness of Americans”⁵—a judgment that would arguably astonish most of the Americans involved, but which reflects the complex cultural legacies that underlie seemingly trivial behavioral patterns that can easily be taken for granted.

Writing in 2021 it is also fair to note the importance of historical attention to manners at a time when, in the United States, the pandemic and political polarization have demonstrably loosened etiquette constraints. This recent deterioration is not the subject of this essay, but it does call attention to the need to treat manners as a historical moving target.⁶

This study urges a more global approach to the modern history of manners and will suggest several preliminary findings, while emphasizing three basic goals: first, as the Chinese-American interaction just mentioned, a global history of manners can offer opportunities for comparative analysis when basic styles are juxtaposed, shedding light on regional approaches beyond the scope of purely internal analysis. A global approach also reveals

that even basics that many would regard as universal attributes of good manners—like saying thank you—are surprisingly varied and complex. Second, building out from such comparisons facilitates consideration of some of the shocks and adjustments required as interregional personal contacts began to expand, particularly from the mid-19th century onward. Here the Chinese experience again offers a suggestive example: a number of Chinese university students believe (almost certainly incorrectly), that the Chinese phrase for hello, *ni hao*, which is not in fact a traditional greeting, emanated from (insulting) words used by Westerners in the treaty ports beginning around 1842. (The claim is that Western sailors greeted passing women by shouting “kneel, whore.”) The specifics here are wrong, and revealingly sensitive, but it is true that the growing use of “hello” in China does result from a two-century process of interactions with outsiders. Beyond this, and this is the most ambitious claim, a global approach suggests some of the ways in which a number of basic processes, including but not confined to increasing contacts, have been prompting some common changes in manners in many different societies, particularly from the early 20th century onward, despite the different cultural contexts.

Some scholarship on manners, while recognizing how revealing the subject is, emphasizes human universals, downplaying comparative distinctions and ignoring factors of historical process altogether. The literature deserves attention, though it is now somewhat dated, but does not reflect the real complexities of the subject. Historians may tire of urging the importance of dealing with change on sister disciplines, but there is no avoiding the challenge, and manners are an important case in point.⁷

One final preliminary matter needs to be addressed: acknowledging Western influence and the risk of oversimplification. This translates a familiar problem in modern world history analysis and teaching into the manners domain: the need to deal with disproportionate Western influence. Perhaps more than in some other areas, courtesy interactions over the past two centuries have been singularly one-sided. Western condescension has yielded to some willingness to compromise on others’ turf in recent decades, but not yet to the extent of trying to learn much that would be applicable back home. And in the 19th century, the contrast between Western self-confidence and local adjustments was undiluted.⁸ Here, the power element in manners was, and often is, clearly displayed, as Westerners assumed superiority in etiquette, leaving others to adjust or be dismissed as less civilized; while those who did attempt some adaptation sought to distinguish themselves from their compatriots.

The issue here goes beyond the obvious fact that European, and later United States, aggressions introduced Western contacts to regions that, previously, had enjoyed greater autonomy in the manners arena. Western pride in their distinctive level of civilization most definitely included confidence in the superiority of their personal habits. Keith Thomas has described how, in the early modern centuries, many people in England became convinced that they lived in the world’s most civilized society.⁹ This undoubtedly reflected not only

the sense of growing power in the wider world, but the process through which, within Europe, the informal rules applied to personal decorum had become more elaborate and self-conscious since the Renaissance, in the pattern sometimes described as the “civilizing process.”¹⁰ Europeans began to reach around the world with a combination of power and smug conviction that easily spilled over into contacts involving manners.

This kind of Western influence was particularly likely to affect upper-class manners, given the fact that the “civilizing process” was itself a top-down movement, with initial etiquette books clearly targeted at “gentlemen” and ambitious rulers eager to impose new constraints on their courts. By the 20th century, however, Western patterns could have wider impact, particularly when they were associated with some common experiences with new technologies or consumer forms.¹¹ But Western models could also misfire, in some cases provoking active disdain. And, as we will see, the whole issue of the West’s role in modern global manners is complicated by the fact that habits in the West itself have been changing fairly rapidly over the past century.

Moreover, a model global history of manners need not be confined to interactions with the West alone—though the factor cannot be avoided entirely. In the brief case studies that follow—meant to illustrate the kind of findings that hopefully can be expanded with wider-ranging comparative work—we will begin with examples of direct Western influence (or rejections of Western influence)—including reactions to the complex process of informalization (Section 1); but then (Section 2) expands into other areas as well—here, sections will cover parallel processes of change in the West and elsewhere associated with new technologies and new hygiene demands; and then (Section 3) will move on to more complex global changes involving challenges to hierarchy, including the impact of growing individualism and the increasing importance of interactions with strangers. Throughout, examples build on the slender stock of comparative examples, drawn primarily from work on several parts of Asia, along with what can be derived from the Western experience directly.

Section 1: Explicit Western Inspiration—Pro or Con

The Case of Russia

Not surprisingly, since it mirrors familiar developments in other domains, early modern Russia provides one of the clearest and earliest examples of efforts to translate Western patterns into domestic reform. Peter the Great was deeply impressed by Western manners and proved eager to use them as an additional means of disciplining the Russian nobility—though as in other areas there was scant concern for the habits of the Russian masses. The state of manners in Russia before Peter the Great has been debated. Foreigners, from the Middle East as well as Western Europe, referred to “a people passing rude, to vices vile inclined”—but elaborate social ceremonies existed as well.¹²

Indeed, the reformist tsar Peter directly organized the first etiquette manual ever ventured in the country, *The Honest Mirror of Youth*, aimed of course at the aristocracy. (It included strong warnings against uppity servants, along with insistence that good servants must be appropriately cared for despite the fact that they were characteristically uncouth and ignorant; the hierarchical thrust of the effort was quite explicit.) Russian manners books would maintain the strong emphasis on hierarchy, and appropriate deference, well in the 19th century.¹³ Peter's venture included a host of conventional sentiments about respect for parents, piety and chastity, and hard work. But it also intoned against more personal practices that may have been common previously, suggesting a new interest in impulse control very much in the style of the Western civilizing process. Thus, at table, "Don't grab the dish first, don't eat like a pig." Be the last to accept a dish when offered, and take the smallest portion. Don't lick one's fingers, wipe the mouth with the hand, or scratch oneself. With regard to hygiene the manual urged that, when people are seated in a circle, only spit outside the circle and then rub it out with the foot. And it was rude to sniff and "pull in snots with the nose and then abhorrently swallow them." Nobles should blow their noses quietly, into a handkerchief; the *Mirror* condemned those who "blow their nose as if they are blowing a horn and with this act scare little children." Belching also occasioned sharp warnings—as had been true in the West from the 16th century onward, as the writings of Erasmus attest. Anger was another target. A gentleman should be in full control of emotions and body alike. Early on, in other words, adjustments in manners could be part of seeking to conciliate Westerners through emulation, though as always with Peter there was also the pleasure of telling the nobility what to do. Interestingly, the pamphlet (small enough to be carried in a pocket, in order to offer on-the-spot guidance) was republished recurrently into the late 19th century.¹⁴

Catriona Kelly traces the ongoing process of Westernizing manners from the mid-18th century through the 20th, and the importance of imitation continues to shine through. True to modern Russian history, conservative nationalist critiques of the artificiality of foreign habits did emerge at various points, and adjustments were made to other changes such as growing consumerism, but in this domain the Western influence was never shaken off until the revolutionary era, and not entirely even then. For while Soviet manners books routinely took potshots at Western bourgeois decadence, a surprising number of Western manners books, including Amy Vanderbilt, were translated and sold—well after much of their advice had become anachronistic in the West itself. It was hard to escape the notion that the West was more refined.¹⁵

The Case of the United States

A broadly similar effort to inculcate upper-class Western manners arguably occurred in the United States in the 19th century, with the new urban upper middle class the primary target. As America's urban social hierarchy became more complex, even amid more

democratic politics, new manners helped the elite distinguish themselves from the *hoi polloi* and respond to the European critique of Americans as uncouth Yankee Doodles. Elaborate codes detailed appropriate table manners and styles of dress, the use of calling cards and thank-you notes, and control of one's temper.¹⁶ Again, this kind of emulation reflected Western Europe's prestige, the upper-class codes developed over several centuries, and the complacent sense of superiority of those European socialites who ventured out into the wider world.

The Case of India

In India, as social contacts between Europeans and upper- or middle-class Indians expanded after 1880, a series of manners books, mainly English-authored, sought to deploy a civilizing process model—under the heading “civility”—to ease interracial relations. The terms of course were largely British, and goals hovered between potentially equal social interactions and maintenance of European superiority. As one manual put it (by William Trego Webb, in 1896), “Indian and European gentlemen are beginning to mix more and more freely in each other's society,” signaling the desirability of guidance on English manners “to which Indian gentlemen might refer in cases of uncertainty.” Sites of interaction included elite social clubs, like the Madras Cosmopolitan Club, but also mixed-race railways cars and other public spaces and even events like birthday parties.¹⁷

Guidance, in the best civilizing process fashion, emphasized the importance of restraint, and while it is important to note that most of the writers acknowledged the validity of traditional Indian manners they also inveighed against a variety of objectionable habits. Thus, it was important not to be “too noisy” in theater audiences, or to engage in “loud or boisterous laughter.” “Noise and clatter” should be avoided when leaving the house of a European host; polite Indians should also avoid fidgeting, and in general keep the body under control. “A calm reserve of demeanor” was a watchword. Strong emphasis was placed on the importance of learning not to stare at others—a really interesting area where the existence of the term “staring” was already revealing for users of English. (Many languages lack this term, and therefore lag in instructions not to.) All this was accompanied by information about dining rules, appropriate dress, tasteful letter writing and the like.¹⁸

The turn-of-the-century advice literature hedged on the question of whether shared good manners would really create social parity. It was clear, of course, that the advice was aimed at a certain class of Indian, not the commoners who were often labeled with the term “vulgar” (from whom the adaptive Indians were also seeking to distinguish themselves)—but this kind of hierarchalism was common in 19th century civilizing process guidance in the West as well. Could the British accept a cosmopolitan Indian and forget he was a colonial subject? The signals were mixed. Indians were repeatedly advised not to show off knowledge of classics of English literature: was this another area of restraint or a reminder that they could not be Western? Too much friendliness should be avoided. Thus,

the Indian at a party, seeing a Western acquaintance across the room, should not rush over to shake hands, but should try to catch his eye and bow or offer *namaste*. But it was also acknowledged that, in their zeal to be Western, some Indians must be forgiven for going a bit too far: thus, while in Britain it was inappropriate for a man to shake hands with a lady unbidden, in India British ladies had learned to accept this initiative from a Westernizing Indian who was doing his best to behave properly.¹⁹

These are revealing passages, though they do not fully indicate Indian response, nor do they move into the period when political independence combined with increasing globalization. By all accounts, issues like appropriate handshaking remain unresolved, with many Indians traditionally reluctant for this kind of physical contact, preferring other acknowledgements, but with a Westernized segment completely comfortable, even extending the gesture to Indian women. Which means that it may still be difficult to know the rules. Interpreting the impact and social extent of a Westernizing civilizing process in manners is always an interesting challenge, but it gains additional complexity when applied across cultural lines.²⁰

The Case of Japan

Finally, the Japanese encounter with Western manners in the 19th/early 20th centuries warrants juxtaposition with the Indian case. What we know to this point suggests some interesting differences, some of which, not surprisingly, illustrate themes already familiar in comparative history. Manners guides had begun to thrive in Japan in the Tokugawa period, reflecting rising literacy levels. And Westerners had already professed considerable awareness of the elaborate structure of Japanese manners before the more extensive interaction: echoes of this admiration continued in the 1850s, with comments about the “real politeness of the people.” There was also a tension not present in India, when Westerners worried that the Japanese were mocking foreigners, faking adaptations in ways “calculated to humiliate and degrade” their new visitors (as one British diplomat put it). And while Japanese leaders had real motivation to copy some Western manners, to show their level of cultivation as they sought to gain greater autonomy, there was arguably less basis for adaptation than what developed in the colonial setting for India’s middle class.²¹

Yet important similarities existed as well. By the later 19th century, Westerners operating in Japan were expressing the same confidence in the superiority of their manners as prevailed in India. An English woman thus noted with relief when she was served “our kind” of tea in “real cups with handles.” Criticisms of the stiffness, insincerity and lack of individual flexibility in Japanese manners continued from the late 19th century past the mid-20th— as in a Fodor’s guide reference, in the 1970s, to Japanese concern for rigid manners as “pathological”. A host of misinterpretations of Japanese rituals continued to inform characterizations of this sort (including unawareness that the Japanese were quite capable of making fun of manners extremes on their own).²²

In this context many Japanese showed real interest not just in sufficient imitation to appease influential Westerners, but in really looking for opportunities for improvement. And some adaptations were absolutely essential to accommodate other changes: for example, growing use of chairs required some adjustments in traditional ritual expressions. But there were limitations as well. During the 1880s many wealthy Japanese made real efforts to please Western visitors by holding dinner parties, and by attending those offered in turn. But the effort ultimately foundered on gender differences. Westerners insisted that wives and even daughters be included in the guest list—and they were deeply uncomfortable when geishas were present. But after some experimentation, most Japanese pulled back. They had no desire to include their wives; they worried that having daughters present (which they understood was a matchmaking ploy) might undermine customary marriage arrangements; and they missed the company of the geishas.²³

This was not, of course, the end of the story. By the 1980s, given Japan's economic success, criticisms of Japanese manners—in guidance ventures for Western visitors—yielded to recommendations of ad hoc adaptation. Limitations persisted. As Bardsley and Miller contend, no one was urging that Japanese manners be imported to Western contexts: the goal was enough adjustment to appease the natives on their own turf. In contrast, Japanese continued to express an interest in exploring selected Western manners for potential national improvements. And while they had traditional words for manners, they also, revealingly, began to use terms like “gentoruman” (gentleman), “echiketto” and “mana” (manners).²⁴

Indeed, one study suggests that by the later 20th century many middle-class Japanese, particularly in the younger generation, became fairly comfortable operating with largely Western manners when the setting required it (though there was some sense that women were more adept at this than men, partly because of greater English language facility). Adaptations ranged from shared clothing styles to adoption of Western habits like thank-you notes; older Japanese also expressed concern that the younger generation was losing their grasp of appropriate linguistic distinctions and honorifics. Yet contrasts persisted—including a far more avid consumption of manners literature than was true in the contemporary West, with the literature itself more wide-ranging. Most Japanese also continued to find comfort in some habits they knew Westerners disapproved of, at least when they were on their own turf: loudly slurping noodles was one humble but telling example. And when Japanese men were “off duty,” they felt far freer than their Western counterparts to do as they pleased; in contrast, Westerners seemed more consistently on their guard, implicitly aware that manners applied not only to business setting but to interactions at sports events, in gyms, at weddings. A contrast persisted.²⁵

Reactions to Western Informalization: A More Diffuse Comparative Challenge

Examples so far have emphasized manners contacts that began before or during the 19th century, when fashionable groups in the West were still promoting the manners associated

broadly with the civilizing process. But patterns were complicated in the 20th and 21st centuries by the more diffuse phenomenon of “informalization”, when Western behaviors began to give off somewhat different, and arguably more confusing signals.

Studies of growing informality in Western manners constitute one of the most intriguing areas of recent research, guided by a number of Dutch sociologists headed by Cas Wouters. The argument is important. Beginning early in the 20th century, the civilizing process in the West took a new turn. Instead of continuing to emphasize greater formality, for example in dining etiquette, good manners increasingly relaxed, at least on the surface. Styles of dress, eating habits, male-female interactions, even proper posture or funeral behavior all introduced greater informality, complicating the traditional role of manners in enforcing social hierarchies. Etiquette books themselves declined—witness contemporary American students who have never heard of the genre or business schools that discover they must train undergraduates in formal dining manners. Mass consumerism and the rise of white collar labor were at least two of the sources of change.²⁶

Western informalization quickly raised challenges for manners in a global context. The U.S. State Department continues to note the complexities directly in its *Protocol for the Modern Diplomat* (2013): “In the relaxed atmosphere of American society, many of the rules of social behavior that were routine a generation ago are today largely ignored, if not unknown. American casualness is often interpreted as rudeness in other societies. What does it say if the representatives of the world’s most powerful nation are indifferent to the appropriate respect owed to representatives of other governments? . . . This can be taken as a personal or national insult.”²⁷

Analysis of the impact of informalization goes well beyond the challenges to modern diplomats, however, though the category itself is interesting.²⁸ A bit of spade work is already available. On the one hand, the globalization of consumer habits such as fast-food dining obviously exports a fair degree of informality, as do global changes in styles of dress. But the Dutch group has also generated examples of resistance and disdain—though the studies invite expansion. They note for example the experience of immigrants to the Netherlands, particularly from Islamic societies like Turkey and Morocco, who find informal Dutch habits a sign of unacceptable laxity and “moral decay”—at least for a crucial generation or two.²⁹

An even more ambitious exploration—though again a brief one—claims that advocates of ISIS-type jihadism have been partly inspired by their revulsion at Western informality, which they actively cite as evidence that the West has become “rotten to the core”. Predictably, evidence centers on the increasingly informal approaches to gender relations and homosexuality. But there are interesting reactions as well on the part of pioneering radical Muslims like the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, who as early as 1948 wrote of his disgust at seeing the informal behavior of Westerners at a funeral, which he found profoundly disrespectful to the dead. In this view, more relaxed manners signaled a growing decline in Western ability to restrain primitive human impulses—a decline that must be resisted with

violence if necessary. In this argument, it is the pressure to adopt “Western informalized behavioral standards” that explains the alienation of many terrorists, particularly among certain immigrants or international students.³⁰

This specific claim aside, the global impact of Western informalization is complicated by the fact that the process does not in fact involve a jettisoning of restraint—appearances to the contrary. Informalization within the West has been accompanied by more rigorous standards in some domains, for example in personal hygiene but also punctuality or certain crowd behaviors—points to which we will return. More generally the decline of the most formal etiquette places a premium on knowing more subtle rules—to take an easy example, the meaning of “business casual” attire—which can be arguably more difficult to grasp than earlier rigidities. Westerners are not as mannerless as they, and others, sometimes imagine, and this complexity shows up in global comparisons as well. But there is a considerable comparative domain here open for further analysis.

Section 2: Parallel Changes

At one level, episodes discussed in this section are just additional examples of societies adjusting to Western standards—and this is undoubtedly what many Westerners have believed when they encountered deviance from their own patterns from the late 19th century onward. Arguably, however, the more interesting point is that the Western manners involved are themselves very new, that the West and other societies like modern China have in fact been engaged in a shared process of reactions to new conditions.

For a modern history of manners within a global framework involves several major instances in which changes were prompted by new developments in consumer technologies, medical science or even childrearing expertise. The results first registered in the West, but quickly spread to other societies—partly because of Western influence but partly because of the dynamics of the new commercial, public health or family patterns themselves. The result was something of a global version of the civilizing process, complicated by some role for Western critiques.

Manners and Modern Consumerism

From the late 19th century onward, several patterns emerged where new behaviors or technologies pioneered in the West were quickly imported into other societies—particularly from the early 20th century onward. Here, tentative changes in Western behaviors were quickly noted elsewhere, resulting in similar, and in some cases almost simultaneous, transformations that reflected both imitation and shared social needs. It is not easy to sort out the relative importance of external influence as opposed to intrinsic pressures for change. Claude Fischer for example charts how, after several decades’ lag, use of the telephone, and behaviors on the phone, began to be incorporated in statements of manners; for

example, it was the telephone operator practice of using the word “hello”—a surprisingly young word; good day was the more traditional greeting—that began to popularize this courtesy word more generally. Opportunities for comparison with developments elsewhere deserve exploration—including, more recently, how cell phones are handled. For quite a while, apparently, good manners in the Soviet Union urged that the originator of a phone call identify himself by saying “the person who is intruding on you is . . .,” a fascinating reaction to technical innovation.³¹

Studies of the emergence of manners while driving would be another comparative opportunity. The advent of train travel also required decisions about manners. Interestingly, women in a number of societies—even ones, like Japan, that put great stock into a public/private distinction in preparing one’s appearance—decided that train cars are not really public spaces, feeling fairly free to apply makeup and other normally more private activities. Here again, similar manners decisions were made in several societies in response to new technologies.³²

Interactions between the growing modern commitment to clocks and watches and the development of new manners concerning punctuality form yet another opportunity to trace the combined impact of Western standards—themselves often quite new—and regional etiquette. In this case of course we know that while modern time consciousness has widely affected global manners—including explicit invocations of occasions when rigorous “English time” applies, as in Brazil, regional variations remain considerable.³³

Audience behavior in movies offers a striking example that can be explored in somewhat greater detail. Richard Butsch has charted the complex transformation of American movie goers from the turn of the 20th century into the 1930s.³⁴ In the early movie showings, habits from popular theater were readily, and quite understandably, translated into the new settings: this involved lots of chatter and shouted comments. Movies may in fact have intensified crowd reactions by the vivid visual portrayals of moving trains and other dramatic experiences, which could prompt shrieks of fear or delight, particularly when the movies themselves were silent. But middle-class movie goers, seeking greater decorum, and probably the more impersonal settings of the movies themselves, quickly initiated a new kind of discipline; so perhaps did the darkened theater itself. By the second decade of the 20th century audiences in the more fashionable movie houses were learning to watch films in silence, with theater managers and audiences themselves enforcing the standard decorum (as they still do). This was a really interesting example of a new etiquette, even in a nation that in other respects seemed to value increasing informality. The process took time: into the 1930s working-class movie houses remained raucous; but then middle-class example and management pressures amid the difficulties of the Depression, plus the advent of sound, completed the process. Ultimately of course, teaching kids to watch movies in silence became a minor but definite duty of proper contemporary American parenting.

The same transformation was quickly urged in other societies—usually against a similar traditional backdrop of boisterous audiences. We have seen that, even before movies, European manners agents were urging more sedate behaviors on Indian theater audiences.³⁵ China in the 1920s offers a particularly direct example. Here was another case in which theater behavior previously had been loosely regulated at best, with many opportunities to let off steam. Indeed, when movies were first imported, after about 1912, Chinese audiences (like their American counterparts slightly earlier), continued to jeer and shout as the films rolled out. People wandered in and out, vendors came in to sell food and other items—just as in popular theater from time immemorial. But then, first in Shanghai, new movie houses were designed, allowing fuller blackouts which inhibited vendor activity; more attention was also paid to hygienic bathrooms, another interesting link with modern manners. In these settings, management began to insist on greater decorum: silence, no eating or smoking, even removal of hats as a new sign of public courtesy. And then as the United States the introduction of talkies, by the later 1920s, prompted further efforts to maintain audience silence, including heightened attempts to ban clapping. Other new rules were attached in what became a modern manners package: ladies should be allowed to enter and exit first; people should wait their turn to exit; if a couple was picked up by a car, the woman should get in the car before the man, and so on. Up-to-date movie houses actually printed suggestions of this sort. Theater managers, playing on the more general theme in the new republic of promoting reform and responsible citizenship, began to claim their mission to “promote modernity, improve public morality, and cultivate civility.” Part of the mission was justified by foreign example (drawn of course from middle-class standards, not ongoing working-class behaviors in the West): the modern civilities were “widely practiced in the West,” and Chinese audiences must not shock foreign observers lest it result in “serious damage to China’s international image.” But there was a domestic mission as well—not totally unlike the one developing simultaneously in the West, of generating a more “disciplined life” as part of successful modernity. And while actual change was gradual—second-run movie houses were still reporting raucous behavior in 1939—it did take increasing hold, and the standards would be actively maintained by the communist regime after 1949.³⁶

Here, clearly, was a case where foreign influence, cited selectively, quickly combined with the internal dynamic of the movies themselves and with nationalist efforts at popular reform to produce an intriguing restructuring of popular manners. The result was less an example of Western pressure than a shared effort, in China and in the West, to impose new disciplinary manners on the masses by elements eager to reform their societies in a variety of ways through additional forms of social control.

Global Hygiene and Etiquette: The History of Spitting

Links between manners and hygiene are an important facet in any historical period. One of the most deep-rooted customs in many societies—the etiquette limitations on

left-handedness, had their basis in hygiene concerns. The Western civilizing process, and also the equivalent that Peter the Great launched in Russia, included courtesy standards on bodily emissions that had clear hygienic implications by the standards of the time.

Obviously, more recent patterns, including new medical knowledge, had implications for manners as well, where innovations initially introduced in the West combined with shared public health concerns to influence changes in other societies. Emphasis on hygiene loomed large in the Soviet manners books of the interwar period—in ways quite similar to patterns in the West in the same period, reflecting shared concerns in urbanizing societies. Many of the same Chinese authorities concerned about improving crowd behavior in movies also had deep interest in changes in hygiene habits. Indeed, hygiene issues were picked up by Chinese reformers early in the process of encountering Western habits—before the end of the 19th century.

But shared hygiene concerns, and cross-regional influence, could yield complicated patterns in actuality. The modern evolution of spitting is a case in point. As with audience behaviors at the movies, domestic sources of change combined with foreign example, but in this case acceptance of new manners proved stubbornly slow.

One of the more familiar invocations of manners disputes in world history involves an early salivary side effect of growing contacts between Westerners and East Asians—as in French Indochina by the later 19th century. Mutual observation quickly led to equally mutual expressions of disdain: French (or other Western) observers deplored the local habit of spitting or blowing phlegm on the ground; and the sentiment was equally vigorously returned by locals who thought the practice of pulling out a piece of white cloth, sneezing into it, and then replacing it in a pocket was absolutely disgusting.³⁷

But the broader history of manners and spitting is somewhat more complicated, for Westerners were still spitting abundantly and publicly into the later 19th century—indeed, spittoons still bedecked some public buildings in regions like the American Midwest until about 50 years ago. The most facile contrast between Western and Asian spitting patterns would be off the mark.

It is true, however, that hygiene advances in the later 19th century, headed by the germ theory, ultimately promoted a new standard of public, and usually private, etiquette in which spitting was vigorously reprobated. Western societies arguably had some advantage in response, since the civilizing process had already sought to guide spitting habits. In fact, however, public spitting remained fairly common in Western Europe, and despite claims to the contrary upper- as well as lower-class men were involved. And in the United States, fueled in part by chewing tobacco, spitting was rampant, as European visitors like Charles Dickens noted with disgust.

But the 1882 discovery of the sources of tuberculosis began to change the game, leading to an interesting combination of policy moves and wider efforts to adjust public manners. France passed a law against public spitting in 1886—though public reminders continued

to be necessary past the 1950s, as in ubiquitous signs in the Paris subways. New York City initiated American policy action in 1896, followed by a number of other cities (though revealingly—given the state’s idiosyncratic behavior during the 2020s pandemic—a public health commissioner in Florida declared that a true Floridian would never surrender this liberty). A real shift in manners developed only gradually—very few arrests or fines were actually implemented. But a variety of women’s groups joined the effort, eager to attack yet another “disgusting habit” of men, and new manners began to be built into childrearing advice with the result that, by the second half of the 20th century, parents no longer had to be reminded to inculcate the new etiquette. Indeed, American manners seem to have adjusted a bit more quickly than their French counterparts. Only baseball players, intriguingly, widely persisted in the more traditional behavior.³⁸

The impact of this Western change on other societies was mixed at best, though Japan fell in line rather quickly. Elsewhere, spitting was not only customary, but widely believed to have positive health benefits in ridding the body of impurities. This was a deeply rooted personal behavior that proved harder to adjust than crowd behaviors in the new movie houses.

Efforts started early, fueled by increasingly open disgust by Western visitors at the spitting habits they encountered in China, India and elsewhere. As early as 1924 Sun Yat-sen sounded a striking appeal for a Chinese version of the civilizing process, attacking “spitting, farting” and other aspects of personal hygiene as areas in which “all Chinese people are unrestrained.” “So even though we have great knowledge in self-cultivation, managing our families, ruling our country, and establishing peace under heaven, when foreigners see these they think us very barbaric.” Here, hygiene clearly combined with a desire to appear less crude in foreign eyes—a powerful combination.³⁹

But appeals of this sort had little impact, until China opened more fully to the world after 1978 and began to depend more, however reluctantly, on visitors’ opinions. Add to this the arrival of new contagious diseases like SARS, and the result was a new public approach. Chinese cities began to ban public spitting early in the 21st century, and the national government joined in as part of preparing for the 2008 Olympic games. Increased foreign tourism by the Chinese themselves added a further factor, for Chinese tourists were often resented as boorish—and while obviously this was a common kind of local complaint against foreigners, the Chinese habits of public spitting added an unusual specific. Globalization, in other words, was finally forcing a manners change. Even with this, adjustments were slow, as disgusted foreigners often noted, but by the second decade of the 21st century younger Chinese had largely internalized the new etiquette—a shift that some sympathetic scholars had once regarded as impossible.

The kind of analysis relevant to manners changes associated with telephones, or movies, or hygiene—combining the recognition of Western influence and example with more widely shared causation—can of course be applied to other modern shifts in manners.

Left handedness might be an interesting case in point. Global manners guides continue to issue dire warnings about the discourtesy of deploying the left hand, most obviously in eating, in regions like the Middle East or India. But in fact, many urbanites in these areas have already changed their approach, even tolerating left handedness in their own children, only a few decades after a comparable shift occurred in the West. Western influence is involved, but so is shared access to modern psychological findings about the burdens of forced conversions; the impact of modern sanitary facilities in reducing one traditional discriminating factor; and in some places at least—Japan is an example—a realization that left handedness can be positively useful in some contemporary sports. Again, regional change is uneven—China in this case seems particularly to hold back—but Western example is only one of several factors leading to adjustments in this old etiquette standard. Widely-shared if gradual changes in some venerable traditions in manners are a non-trivial facet of modern globalization, and the factors go beyond the role of the West.⁴⁰

Section 3: Hierarchies and “Informal” Rules

One of the basic global changes in manners over the past 250 years has been the progressive reduction—though hardly elimination—of manners classically aimed at enforcing traditional hierarchies. Here is another category where Western models have played a role, but where many regions have been involved in some common processes. Political revolutions launched this transformation in some cases—though in what became the United States commercial expansion generated more egalitarian manners even before the revolutionary impact; and while this pattern began in the West it gained separate momentum from the great revolutions of the 20th century. Later, the subtler process of “informalization” in the West itself provided another and in some ways more complicated spur to a partial democratization of manners from the late 19th century onward. Finally, the relationship between manners and strangers became a comparative topic in its own right.

Within Western societies, democratization provides one of the most compelling reasons to examine modern manners, but amid real complexity. Deferential manners unquestionably declined—the word deference itself took a nosedive in frequency of usage after the late 18th century. But the modern manners regime combined more subtle differentiations with a superficial egalitarianism, harmonizing manners with new kinds of economic and political inequalities. In some cases—as in the spread of “ladies first” etiquette in the United States before the Civil War—innovations might even aim at concealing a growing power imbalance. Similar combinations would also affect the later patterns of informalization.⁴¹

The world history question, of course, is whether some similar subtleties describe the advent of more democratic manners in other societies, whether because of Western example or for independent reasons. And while the question cannot yet fully address pending fuller cross-cultural work—and regional variations may prevent a single response in any event—some possibilities can already be sketched.

Revolutions and Reactions

Complexities certainly surround what we know about revolutionary impacts, though fuller comparative analysis would be welcome. All the big risings—the French, Russian or Chinese—had serious short-term impacts on manners, substituting new terms like citizen or comrade for older hierarchical courtesy titles, and reducing elite distinctions in fashion standards. However, this was often followed by some partial retreats. In the American and French cases, aspiring upper middle-class families in the 19th century sought to create the new manners differentials with the unwashed masses, though without restoring all the old hierarchical etiquette.⁴²

Post-revolutionary manners books in Russia did not retreat so blatantly, as egalitarian references persisted more strongly. Here too, however, there were signs of compromise with older etiquette traditions. A dominant theme in Soviet advice literature was the importance of “cultured behavior,” now enjoined on the masses as well as the elites, and this in turn evoked many of the familiar principles of the civilizing process, including abundant self-restraint. By the 1950s widely popular manuals even sported titles such as “Let’s Have a Little Talk about Good Breeding.” People in various professions, from shopkeepers to policemen, were urged to avoid “false bonhomie” and consistently use the polite form of address. Further, access to new fashion standards quickly became available in literature directed toward the new elite—as in style magazines—with egalitarianism acknowledged either with the promise that such goods would ultimately be available to all or by claims that the masses in fact already had access: “every Soviet woman now has the chance of taking trouble with her toilettes” (from the 1940s).⁴³

China also displayed a complex postrevolutionary combination of innovation and continuity. Mao famously noted that “a revolution is not a dinner party,” and for several decades attention to courtesy could be seen as a recognition of privilege; and it was imperative not to be polite to “enemies of the people,” infusing manners with complicated decisions about political alignments. But revolutionary pressures also created needs to reestablish informal support systems. An intriguing study of post-revolutionary patterns shows how, despite official egalitarian pressure, older manners around the concept of *guanxixue* have been revived and redefined to combine gift-giving and intense personal relationships—the relationships angle differentiating the tradition from simple bribery. Here too, in other words, recognition of some general revolutionary impact on manners must recognize subsequent regional readjustments, which selectively redeploy older rituals—reflecting the limitations of an unadulterated revolutionary approach against hierarchical manners of any sort.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the fact remains that revolutions have provided important new signals about manners, most obviously in the societies directly affected but, over time, through wider influence as well. And the main thrust has reduced some of the more extreme manners associated with social hierarchy.

Bowing

One specific measurement of change, though admittedly fairly familiar, highlights the complexities of a global process with regional variants. Not surprisingly, bowing declined more decisively in societies that experienced revolution than in their non-revolutionary counterparts—though ultimately wider impact emerged as well. Thus bowing, long an imperial staple, substantially declined in China. The 1911 revolution quickly worked to abolish prostration, favoring simpler bows or tips of the hat to show respect, and communist attacks on privilege (plus the decline of hats) cut into that compromise. Bowing still occurs occasionally among older people, in closing out some sports events, or as a sign of apology—even communist leaders, though not the current one, sometimes bow in acknowledgement of public distress, an indication that the gesture lingers in memory. In contrast, of course, bowing is alive and well in Japan and South Korea. (The Japanese imported bowing from China in the 7th century, though it migrated below the aristocracy only in the 17th.) Bows of greeting can now be supplemented or replaced by handshakes, but bows of deference, apology or farewell persist strongly—modified mainly by the fact they are more commonly executed from a standing position rather than kneeling. As was traditionally the case, fairly elaborate rules apply, in terms of the depth of a bow in relation to the status of the individual (or group) to whom it is directed.

To be sure, scholars dealing with societies such as Japan urge that bowing is more complex than Westerners realize, that it should be seen more in terms of respect than hierarchy. The reminder that manners are hard to interpret cross-culturally is appropriate. Still gradations in bowing do suggest hierarchical considerations in paying respect, whether the rankings reflect social distinctions, age factors or other criteria.⁴⁵

Bowing in India received mixed treatment in the turn-of-the-century etiquette movement. On the one hand, it sometimes seemed more acceptable than overdoing Western habits like the handshake: bowing might allow a mixture of manners and distancing. But the literature also urged Indians to avoid bowing too deeply; an inclination of the head should suffice, not bending the body in ways that suggested excessive hierarchy.⁴⁶

The American revolution put a severe dent on bowing in the United States (save in some religious settings); Thomas Jefferson notoriously disdained the hierarchical implications of bowing, preferring handshakes, and the practice declined further under Andrew Jackson. (An English visitor at the time complained that the absence of bowing made it difficult to determine the social status of people he met.)⁴⁷ By the 1870s, reactions to encounters with Japanese bowing reflected deep differences in relevant propriety. An American teenager, leaving a Japanese home amid floor-level bows from her hosts, expressed her shock: how could a “free-born American” practice “such slavish, humiliating customs?” Vestiges however survived surprisingly well, as children were still encouraged to bow on occasion. Even the shocked teenager noted that she offered an “American bow” to her Japanese hosts.

(There is no record, unfortunately, of how her hosts reacted to the display of republican manners.)⁴⁸ And rules on bowing were still being discussed in the 1922 edition of Emily Post. Here, recipients were mainly ladies and the elderly, not social superiors, and it was important not to do more than incline the head lest one seem odd. But by World War II the habit had disappeared. More recently this has occasioned the amusing politicized reactions when an American leader like George H.W. Bush or Barack Obama chooses to respect the custom when greeting Japanese or British royalty—in Obama’s case, quickly condemned by Republicans as a “sign of weakness.” Bowing of course ultimately declined in Britain, but a larger number of ritual occasions remain—in the judicial system as well as with the royals.

Here, in other words, is a global process in the history of manners dependent in part on modern political experience, and while Western customs are involved, other factors play a role as well—as the Japanese/Chinese contrast suggests. The standard mantra of global history—balancing the local and the global—clearly applies.

In this case, a contemporary addendum may also prove relevant. Some observers have speculated that gestures such as bowing may be revived given the impact of the pandemic on physical contact. Traditions here—not only in East Asia, but Southeast Asia and Africa—may prove more successful than awkward innovations such as elbow bumps.

Individualism

The rise of individualism is not really covered by the civilizing process concept—it fits more readily with later informalization. Here however is another development that cuts into hierarchical etiquette, and while fabled Western individualism plays a role the phenomenon does not depend on Western influence alone.

We have already noted that Westerners have frequently invoked their individualism in criticizing structured manners in other societies, such as Japan. But the tension between individualism and more traditional manners is not a Western monopoly. Chinua Achebe writes of the clash between growing individualism in Nigerian cities, and the manners expected as a member of an extended family, as early as the 1920s: willingness to participate in time-consuming family gatherings after a death, or toleration of untimed visits by family members—both matters of traditional good breeding—visibly declined among many consumer-oriented Africans.⁴⁹ Interest in individualism emerges in studies of Russian manners codes: the popularity of translated versions of Samuel Smiles, in the 19th century, was largely channeled into recommendations about educational advancement, but how to account for the extraordinary appeal of Dale Carnegie’s translated work in the Soviet era?⁵⁰ More explicitly, a study of a changing Chinese village in the later 20th century notes the rise of the “uncivil individual” (female as well as male), interested in personal advancement and romantic love, impatient with manners that seek to tie younger adults to the extended family and the chain of ancestors.⁵¹ On the other hand, yet another analysis

highlights the continuing gap between Japanese and Western manners in the acceptability of self-assertion or even personal requests—despite decades of interaction.⁵² Clearly, exploration of tensions between growing individualism and more customary etiquette deserves wider comparative attention even if the idea of a special Western proclivity is maintained.

Strangers

One final manners dimension follows from the reconsideration of hierarchy broadly construed. The challenge of dealing with manners and strangers is hardly a familiar category, but a contemporary Chinese-Western comparison suggests some unexpected contours. For it turns out that Western standards, even amid the reign of greater informality, include a number of taken-for-granted guidelines for dealing with strangers that Chinese manners, elaborately structured and detailed within a particular group or amid clearly recognized hierarchy, did not traditionally encompass. And, as urbanization and wider interactions have expanded in China, some Chinese have become increasingly aware of certain possible advantages in some (largely unacknowledged) imitation, where Western influences again intertwine with structural change.

In the aftermath of Mao's reign, communist party leaders launched a rather different campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s, urging national attention to "five courteous phases", and to wider standards of courtesy more generally. New etiquette manuals were issued; key Ministries published edicts like the "Circular for Fostering Good Manners" (1981). A host of private courtesy schools sprang up. And Party leaders appeared on television to push the new vocabulary: this was a full-press effort, that would continue at least until the ramp-up for the 2008 Olympic Games. The campaign had several goals, beyond reining in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Gaining greater international respect was one: the courtesy campaign seemed essential in winning recognition for China as an "advanced civilization." Here was familiar motivation for what amounted to a partial westernization campaign, in some senses picking up on efforts launched earlier by Sun Yat-sen. A subsidiary goal involved promoting standards that would foster ties with overseas Chinese, many of whom had already assimilated the relevant manners. But there was also a perceived need, even in furthering the revolutionary goal of social equality, to promote new habits that would reduce the distinction between familiars and strangers—cutting into the rooted idea that "insiders are different from outsiders"—in a society undergoing rapid urbanization. And this final goal was arguably the difference maker, helping to explain why new habits were in fact gradually, if hesitantly, not just preached but adopted.⁵³

The five courtesies were simple enough on the face of things: establish the habits of saying hello, goodbye, please, thank you and excuse me. These—or their linguistic equivalents—had gradually become standard ways for people in the West to interact with familiars and strangers alike. They built on the Christian recognition of strangers as fellows in faith (equivalent motives emerged of course in Islam); on the utility of wider courtesies as cities

grew in the Middle Ages; on the civilizing process itself, when people like Erasmus wrote manners books in principle for all comers; and then of course the final push of industrial urbanization. Western societies that were also immigrant receivers, like the United States, had even more reasons to promote anonymity-easing manners—this is one explanation for the unusual American impulse to smile at strangers; it may also help explain why Americans presumably say thank you for frequently than any other people in the world, and frequently bemuse even the Brits by insisting on adding “you’re welcome.”⁵⁴

But this was not the Chinese tradition, despite a much longer history of manners—the word for courtesy goes back to at least 300 BCE—and etiquette books; Confucianism had of course expressly emphasized manners as a means of disciplining and refining emotion in favor of greater social harmony.⁵⁵ But the manners involved were directed mainly at a combination of hierarchy and familiarity—with the addition of elaborate arrangements for the treatment of recognized guests. Manners books for example emphasized interactions within a clan, not behaviors in general—and clearly this approach survived even though Chinese cities grew well beyond the levels of their premodern Western counterparts.

In this system, people are greeted in terms of relationships: uncle, have you eaten today; third brother, you look tired, with inquiries attached that many Westerners find intrusive (“do you have enough layers of underwear on”, for example, on a cold day). And for groups that are simply inferior—women in many circumstances, shopkeepers, peasants—there was no need for a special vocabulary of any kind. (Even Western guidebooks as late as the 1960s warned against thanking service personnel like waiters, lest it encourage them to get “ideas above their station”).⁵⁶

In this context, the five courteous phrases campaign faced some rough going, despite the fact that interactions with Westerners since the 1850s had provided some experience with a different linguistic approach to manners. Many educated Chinese note that even in the 1950s they had no idea what hello (*ni hao*) meant, and even as the word spread they often remained more comfortable using it with foreigners than with other Chinese. (To some Chinese, in fact, using the word was and remains equivalent to announcing, “I am a foreigner”).⁵⁷ Thank you could be a challenging concept, in dealing with people who were performing services appropriate to their place in the hierarchy, including the family hierarchy. “Excuse me” might be particularly difficult: what was wrong with bumping into a stranger in the first place? If something need be said in a crowded situation, more traditional phrases like “coming through” often made more sense than a phrase that implied that strangers were being asked to do a favor. Related notions, like I’m sorry, were even more perturbing, particularly when they might be called for in dealing with women or children. It might be more appropriate to say I’m embarrassed, than to admit the possibility of fault; again, small-scale hierarchies loom large. A father tells of his real pride in telling his daughter he was sorry after accidentally breaking a toy—he saw it as a real breakthrough to more modern relationships, and to recognition of children as individuals

(as childrearing manuals began to urge from 1978 onward).⁵⁸ With all of the five phrases some urban Chinese long compromised by simply using the English word, which went less against the grain than incorporating the new relationships into Chinese.

Pressure to adopt the new manners has applied particularly strongly to women and service personnel—reminding of similar distinctions that accompanied the rise of white collar occupations in the West a few decades earlier.⁵⁹ How widely customers, particularly male customers, have bent remains unclear, though there is no question of considerable generational change. The whole ongoing episode forms an intriguing example of the deep importance—and difficulty—of changes in manners, the power of foreign example in a globalizing society, and the parallel processes—if at slightly different dates—that have occurred in many societies over the past century plus.

Extending manners to the treatment of strangers may well be another example, beyond the more familiar staples, of the civilizing process, and while it is important to know more about when these habits began in the West, it illustrates as well, the decline of hierarchy in the modern manners domain—when servers deserve salutations and acknowledgement as well as the served. The extension also stands as another reminder that contemporary informality in the West masks a wide range of etiquette rules. This also involves the pressures on service workers to mask their emotions in favor of cheerful manners to customers—a familiar point but one that deserves incorporation in manners history in places like Russia and China as well as the West.⁶⁰ But—as with informalization more generally—the process can also elide distinctions between familiars and unfamiliar that remain very important in other cultures. Again, “thank you” offers an illustration. In many societies still—such as India and some other parts of Asia—the Western habit of extending thanks to family members can seem deeply offensive. It implies that what people are doing out of “natural” family obligation is somehow noteworthy, that otherwise they might not do what they know they are supposed to do.⁶¹ The same reactions may apply to the American propensity of smiling at any and all comers, which in many other cultures seems juvenile or a bit mad partly, again, because it fails to distinguish between the intimate and the general.⁶² The point is predictable enough: comparison in the modern history of manners remains complex, and undeniable convergence on some points—like urging fellow Chinese to accept more strictures in dealing with strangers—will bring loss as well as gain.

Conclusion: a Global Topic?

This sketch—aimed less at presenting sweeping conclusions than at stimulating more focused comparative and global research and analysis while adding opportunities for classroom discussion—has raised the possibility of extending the idea of a “civilizing process” to a more global platform as a means of dealing with many extensive changes in manners over the past century plus. Interactions between the West and other societies, along with

additional factors such as new public health needs, have, it seems to me, promoted some common reactions aimed at introducing manners that encourage new forms of personal restraint—while also relaxing some of the older emphases on hierarchy maintenance. “Civilizing process” is a tempting umbrella term, but it also has considerable baggage that must be noted in conclusion—and the baggage may prove to be even more jarring in a world history context.

In the first place, the term is vigorously contested in Western history. Medievalists, headed by Barbara Rosenwein, have loudly objected, mainly on grounds that many “emotional communities” in premodern Western society were already abundantly mannered⁶³ and hardly the crude free-for-all that the simplest notion of a civilizing process implies. The objections have not destroyed the concept, though they certainly and usefully complicate it, but the furor can certainly prompt concerns that exportation to a more global platform is imprudent. There is no question that any invocation of a civilizing process must pay careful attention to antecedent manners, which is no small task. And, of course, the concept itself is double-edged (usefully so), suggesting improvements in social interactions but also new levels of social control.

We have also noted that at least as developed by Norbert Elias the civilizing process idea centers on a somewhat narrow range of manners; wider areas of behavior need to be included in modern assessments— including of course the tensions of growing individualism, but also family behaviors and standards of dress. In this vein, Catriona Kelly, writing about Russia, refers to civilizing processes, to capture the fuller scope involved.

More fundamentally, a wider application of the concept, however redefined, legitimately invites all the objections to Western primacy that inevitably and properly color work in modern world history. Western manners have hardly won the day globally, and their influence has been massively complicated by the unmannerly behavior of many Western power wielders. Western models have produced objections; they have combined with established regional patterns in complex ways; they have interacted with other factors such as revolutionary rhetorics or the demands of urban hygiene. Further study of Western impact in this area is warranted, but it may be that references to a civilizing process will ultimately founder amid the complications involved.

Beyond this, in what is the most interesting tension, whether the modern focus is Western or global—developments in manners over the past two centuries mix areas in which new levels of personal restraint are encouraged with areas in which older constraints are relaxed. To a classic Western aristocrat or Chinese mandarin, modern manners are hopelessly informal and unregulated, hardly a model of civilizing advance. It is a rebalancing of constraints, not a systematic deintensification, that really describes the process. This is the complexity that has provoked debate in the West and now in the world more generally, as manners interact with new systems of hierarchy and the concomitant influence of commercial consumerism.

What counts are the changes the concept, and its new companion piece on informalization, have tried to capture, and the ways that some of these changes can improve our understanding of aspects of modern global history. This very much includes the role of manners in global power relationships, between Westerners and others but also within societies as manners adapters or reformers seek to highlight their social role or as changes seek to grease the wheels of commercial consumerism. Obviously, a more ambitious world history effort must offer more explicit decisions about what etiquette domains are particularly revealing; a fuller effort will require not only a more comprehensive regional roster but also a wider topical range—including for example the role of manners in changing gender relations.⁶⁴ Additional efforts can also include the development of global manners codes for key sports and their audiences—think of the complex etiquette expected in international tennis, for players and crowds alike—or in military ceremonies. And we need more work and discovery on modern patterns in other world regions; a focus largely on the West, Russia and key parts—but only parts—of Asia is clearly inadequate. But these extensions are worth promoting—that’s the main contention here—for manners help translate larger processes like democratization or globalization into more direct understanding of how modern people in many parts of the world have been adjusting, or have been prompted to adjust, the conduct of their lives.

Peter N. Stearns is University Professor of History at George Mason University. He has taught a one-semester world history course at least once a year since the 1980s, and also now teaches a graduate course in the field. He has also written widely on world history, including a number of contributions to the Routledge “Themes in World History” series, which he edits. His research also involves the history of emotions, combining largely American data with efforts to broaden the field beyond Western confines in edited volumes on topics such as death and happiness. Stearns was recently named a Distinguished Scholar by the American Historical Association. He offer his thanks to his many colleagues in the George Mason History Department for their various comments and suggestions, and to the editors at *World History Connected*. He can be reached at pstearns@gmu.edu

NOTES

¹ C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620–1860* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1999); Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit Of Civility: Manners and Civility in Early Modern England* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2018); Eric Dunning, *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence and Civilisation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Abram de Swaan, “Politics of Agoraphobia,” *Theory and Society* 10 (1981), 359–80; Wilbert Van Vree, *Meetings, Manners and Civilization: The Development of Modern Meeting Behaviour*, translated by Kathleen Bell (London and New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2001).

² Teachers of modern world history find many rich examples in each of this article’s sections. Some sections connect/add examples to well-known issues in world history courses, such as Peter the Great’s cultural reforms and Japanese manners under the pressure of modernization. There is ample opportunity as well to deal with the complex issue of the range, and limits, of Western influence.

³ Soumen Mukherjee and Leslie Ramos-Salazar, “‘Excuse us, your manners are missing!’: The role of business etiquette in today’s era of cross-cultural communication,” *TMS Business Review* 2, no. 1 (June 2014): 18–28.

⁴ Cas Wouters, *Informalization: Manners and Emotions Since 1890* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007); Cas Wouters and Michael Dunning, eds, *Civilisation and Informalisation: Connecting Long-Term Social and Psychic Processes* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁵ Mary Erbaugh, “China Expands Its Courtesy: saying ‘hello’ to strangers,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67 (May, 2019): 621–52.

⁶ Timothy Egan. “America Is Getting Meaner.” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/opinion/trump-jan-6-america.html>.

⁷ Penelope Brown, and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); But see also Anna Wierzbicka, *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2009), especially chapters 2 and 3.

⁸ Jan Bardsley and Laura Miller, eds., “Introduction,” *Manners and Mischief: Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011).

⁹ Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility*.

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, revised edition (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

¹¹ For wide discussions of reactions to Western ideas of civilization (without however fully using a civilizing process model), M. Pernou and others, *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Asia and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), including Elnor Wigen, “The Education of the Ottoman Man and the Practice of Orderliness.” The book makes it clear that by the late 19th century many Asian societies were encountering Western manners as a lesson in emotional restraint (whether or not they wished to emulate)—even though Westerners themselves saw China and Japan as unduly repressed.

¹² Lloyd E. Berry and Robert O. Crummey, eds, *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom: Russia in the Accounts of Sixteenth-Century English Voyagers* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

¹³ Catriona Kelly, “Educating Tat’yana, Schooling Evgeny: Propaganda for Manners and Moral Education, 1760–1880,” *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–84.

¹⁴ Nancy S. Collman, “Etiquette for Peter’s Time: ‘The Honorable Mirror for Youth,’” *Russian History* 35, no. 1/2 (2008): 63–83.

¹⁵ Kelly, “The Beauties of *Byt*: Household Manuals, Social Status, and National Identity, 1830–1880,” *Refining Russia*, 85–155.

¹⁶ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in 19th Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990); see also Stephen Mennell, *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

¹⁷ W. T. Webb, *English Etiquette For Indian Gentlemen* (Calcutta and Bombay: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1888).

¹⁸ Pramod K. Nayar, “Civil Modernity: The Management of Manners and Polite Imperial Relations in India, 1880–1930,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 740–57; Mohinder Singh, “Spectres of the West” in Pernou et al, *Civilizing*.

¹⁹ Nayar, “Civil Modernity,” 751.

²⁰ Mukherjee and Romas-Salazar, “‘Excuse us, your manners are missing!’”; Louise Overgaard, *An Analysis of Indian Culture in an Era of Globalization* (Aarhus School of Business: Department of Language and Business Communication, 2010).; Judith E. Walsh. *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004); Anindyo Roy, *Civility and Empire: Literature and Culture in British India, 1821–1921* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ Jan Bardsley and Laura Miller, eds, “Manners and Mischief: Introduction,” *Manners and Mischief: Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011), 1–28; see also Patricia J. Wetzell, *Keigo in Modern Japan: Polite Language from Meiji to the Present* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

²² Gavin James Campbell, “Mortified, Mocking and Dissembling: Western Adventures in Japanese Etiquette,” in Bardsley and Miller, *Manners and Mischief*, 80–94; Oleg Benesh, “Patriotism, Virtue and the Clash of Civilities in Japanese,” in Pernau et al, *Civilizing*.

²³ Campbell, “Mortified, Mocking, and Dissembling,” *Manners and Mischief*; Sally A. Hasting, “A Dinner Party is Not a Revolution: Space, Gender, and Hierarchy in Meiji Japan,” in Bardsley and Miller, *Manners and Mischief*, 95–113. Note some similar concerns about Western inclusion of women in social events came up in India: Roy, *Civility and Empire*. At the same time as these experimental adjustments were occurring, the Meiji regime was also working on new linguistic forms that would help maintain social distinctions in the new social environment—with no concern for Western models involved. See also Wetzell, *Keigo in Modern Japan*.

²⁴ Bardsley and Miller, *Manners and Mischief*; Overgaard, *An Analysis of Indian Culture in an Era of Globalization*.

²⁵ Bardsley and Miller, *Manners and Mischief*; Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*, illustrated edition (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); see also Wetzell, *Keigo in Modern Japan*.

²⁶ Wouters, *Informalization*; Wouters and Dunning, *Civilisation and Informalisation*.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Protocol for the Modern Diplomat* (Washington: Foreign Service Institute, 2013).

²⁸ Note that Wouters’ information argument claims a common pattern across 20th-century Western societies. It may be desirable to introduce some comparative distinctions within that mix: for example, the intriguingly informal habits of using first names for total strangers—among other things, in hopes of selling them something by implying a personal connection—has ultimately

spread across the West, but it surely started in the sales-minded United States, The same applies to the dropping of titles like “sir” or “ma’am” to teachers or superiors, which occurred sooner and more fully on this side of the Atlantic (with some lag in the South).

[29](#) Arjan Post, “Informalization and Integration Conflicts: the two-faced reception of migrants in the Netherlands,” in Cas Wouters and Michael Dunning, eds., *Civilisation and Informalisation*, 267–90.

[30](#) Michael Dunning, “Informalisation and Brutalisation: jihadism as a part-process of global integration and disintegration,” in Wouters and Dunning, *Civilisation and Informalisation*, 217–45.

[31](#) Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994); Kelly, *Refining Russia*.

[32](#) Bardsley and Miller, “Introduction,” *Manners and Mischief*, 1–28.

[33](#) Peter Stearns, *Time in World History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

[34](#) Richard Butsch, “American Movie Audiences of the 1930s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 59 (2001): 106–20; see also Meredith C. Ward, *Static in the System: Noise and the Soundscape of American Cinema Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2019) and Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[35](#) Nayar, “Civil Modernity.”

[36](#) Zhiwei Xiao, “Movie House Etiquette Reform in Early Twentieth-Century China,” *Modern China* 32 (October 2006).

[37](#) Kaushik Iyer, “To Blow or To Sniff: culture shock for an expat,” *Internations*, Jan. 16, 2018.

[38](#) J.R. Garrett, “Changing Attitudes on Salivary Secretion: a short history on spit,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 68 (1975): 553–60; Robert Arthur, *You Will Die: the burden of modern taboos* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013).

[39](#) Ross Coomber, Leah Moyle, and Adele Pavlidis. “Public Spitting in ‘Developing’ Nations of the Global South: Harmless Embedded Practice or Disgusting, Harmful and Deviant?” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South* (Basel, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 493–520; Angelika Messner, “Transforming Chinese Hearts, Minds and Bodies in the Name of Progress, Civility and Civilization,” in Pernau et al, *Civilizing*.

[40](#) Peter N. Stearns, *Cultural Change in Modern World History: Cases, Causes and Consequences* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

[41](#) Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities*.

[42](#) Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*.

[43](#) Kelly, *Refining Russia*, 287.

[44](#) Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[45](#) Bardsley and Miller, *Manners and Mischief*.

[46](#) Nayar, “Civil Modernity.”

[47](#) Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790–1840*, illustrated edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).

[48](#) Campbell, “Mortified, Mocking, and Dissembling,” *Manners and Mischief*.

[49](#) Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

[50](#) Kelly, *Refining Russia*, 371–2.

[51](#) Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[52](#) Wierzbicka, “Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts,” *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, 25–66; Wierzbicka, “Cross-cultural pragmatics and different cultural values,” *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, 67–130.

[53](#) Erbaugh, “China Expands Its Courtesy: saying ‘hello’ to strangers;” see also Yuling Pan, *Politeness in Chinese Face-to-Face Interaction* (New York: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 2000); Kaidi Zhan, *The Strategies of Politeness in the Chinese Language* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992).

[54](#) Peter N. Stearns, *Happiness in World History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020); C. Kotchemidova, “From Good Cheer to ‘Drive by Smiling’: a social, history of cheerfulness,” *Journal of Social History* 39 (2005), 5–37.

[55](#) Chu Hsi, and Patricia Buckley Ebrey. *Chu Hsi’s “Family Rituals”: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[56](#) Erbaugh, “China Expands Its Courtesy: saying ‘hello’ to strangers.”

[57](#) Matthew B. Christensen, “你好 and Greeting Strategies in Mandarin Chinese,” *The Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, USA* 41, no. 3 (2006): 19–34.

[58](#) Erbaugh, “China Expands Its Courtesy: saying ‘hello’ to strangers.”

[59](#) Susan Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940*, reprint edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

[60](#) Arlie Russell Hochschild. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

[61](#) Mukherjee and Romas-Salazar, “‘Excuse us, your manners are missing!’”

[62](#) Kotchemidova, “From Good Cheer to ‘Drive by Smiling.’”

[63](#) Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[64](#) A global/comparative history of changes in concepts and enforcements of modesty would be a promising topic in the gendered manners domain. The subject is contemporary as well as historical, as the Me Too movement for example seeks to install new manners (as well as legal liabilities) as modifications of undue informality in ways that have cut across some (but not all) regional lines. This is an area, however, where global interactions can also be quite limited, as the many clashes over appropriate gender manners in Afghanistan and elsewhere suggest. Finally, it is likely that some important manners domains—for example, those associated with death—may be unusually resistant to cross-cultural influence—though further inquiry is warranted.