

A New Method and Tool for Writing Global History: A Review of *Moving Crops and the Scales of History*

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Review of Bray, Francesca, Barbara Hahn, John Bosco Lourdusamy, and Tiago Saraiva. 2023. *Moving Crops and the Scales of History*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

From a very early period, the Chinese already vaguely sensed that the cultivation of crops required an intricate system. The third century BCE work *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋) states that crops were fed by heaven and raised by earth, and that harvests depended on the farmers who worked the land. Therefore, these three elements, that is, heaven, earth, and farmers, together with crops, jointly constituted a complex community. According to the ancient Chinese, moving a crop away from its native place could bring huge benefits to the new area to which the crop was moved. When writing and compiling *Fundamentals of Agriculture and Sericulture* (*Nongsang jiyao* 农桑辑要), the officials of the Agricultural Extension Bureau 司农司 in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) excitedly noted the changes brought about by non-native crops to the agriculture of the Central Plains of China 中原: “Ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*) is a crop native to southern China, while cotton (*Gossypium herbaceum*) comes from the Western Regions 西域. In recent years, nevertheless, ramie has been introduced to Henan, while cotton has started to be planted in Shaanxi. The two crops thrive and show no difference from local crops. Farmers in the two regions benefit a lot therefrom” (Agricultural Extension Bureau 1888, *juan* 2:21).¹ However, the movement of crops could sometimes lead to disastrous results. As a popular Chinese proverb goes,

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1 “苧麻，本南方之物；木棉亦西域所产。近岁以来，苧麻艺于河南，木棉种于陕右，滋茂繁盛，与本土无异。二方之民，深荷其利。”

“sweet mandarin orange trees will bear sour fruits after being transplanted from south of the Huaihe River to north of the Huaihe River.”²

Since the publication of *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* by Alfred Crosby in 1973, historians have come to realize that moving crops are excellent objects for writing history. In recent years, as studies on global history have become increasingly popular, a large number of works on crops have been published. One representative achievement of this research is the recognition that by connecting such crops as cotton, coffee, tea, rice, and pepper with global history, the processes by which crops moved from their places of origin to become worldwide products reveal the complicated relationship between these moving crops and the emergence of global capitalism (Beckert 2014; Sedgewick 2020; Rappaport 2017; Bray et al. 2015; Shaffer 2013).

Unlike the vague descriptions made by the ancient Chinese on crops and their mobility, and different from the research on the unidirectional movement of individual crops, this ambitious and outstanding work starts by proposing a refined definition of “cropscape,” namely, all the elements relating to planting a specific crop at a specific time in a specific place. On this basis, Professor Francesca Bray and her coauthors reorganize and narrate the histories of a number of crops along six axes, namely, time, place, size, actants, compositions, and reproductions. Their research disrupts the periodization and regionalization that people are familiar with, and goes beyond the existing structures of global history and comparative histories, including traditional scales, boundaries, and directionalities. Through carefully selected and interconnected case studies, the authors challenge the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism in global history studies, defy the standard dichotomy between modern and non-modern, theoretically elaborate the impacts of crops on history, and provide a novel and experimental method for writing global history. Two aspects of the book are particularly impressive. The first is that the book pays attention to many minor crops in addition to such staple crops as wheat, maize, and lowland rice, and deftly includes these minor crops (for example, tuber crops) in the authors’ historical process model from an anthropological perspective. The other aspect is that, although moving crops are the theme of the book, the authors’ attention is not limited to moving crops and the new cropscaapes created by them. As demonstrated in the descriptions of the tea industry’s decline in China and the long history of tulip cultivation in the Ottoman Empire, the authors also observe what changes may appear regarding crops that remain in their native places.

The greatest contribution of the book is that it offers a new alternative to history writing, rather than just revealing brand-new or hidden histories of some crops. Even

2 “橘生淮南则为橘，生于淮北则为枳。”

more importantly, the book provides writers of macrohistories and microhistories around the world with a new tool, a new methodological framework with multiple focuses and diverse scales. When scale or focus changes, this tool can capture more historical details, play an effective role in studies on the movement and changes of objects, and should prove to be a significant inspiration for Chinese agricultural history research.

As China was one of the origin sites of now globalized crops, their movement has constituted a key topic attracting great attention from researchers of Chinese agricultural history. This attention paid by scholars to the movement of crops in Chinese history has been mainly focused on two aspects: The first encompasses studies of the crops introduced into China through the Silk Road in early times, particularly during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, and those introduced into the country from the Americas in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912). Representative studies include those made by Berthold Laufer, Ho Ping-ti, and Wang Siming 王思明.³ However, the focus of these studies is mainly limited to the introduction, expansion, and spread of crops. Unlike the authors of this book, these scholars pay relatively little attention to how a new community is established through the process of the competition between the local and new crops, or to the new composite systems they form. If the new crops, local crops, the introducers of the new crops, and the growers of both the new and local crops are all perceived as actors, scholars can reach some new conclusions by applying actor-network theory (ANT) in their analyses.

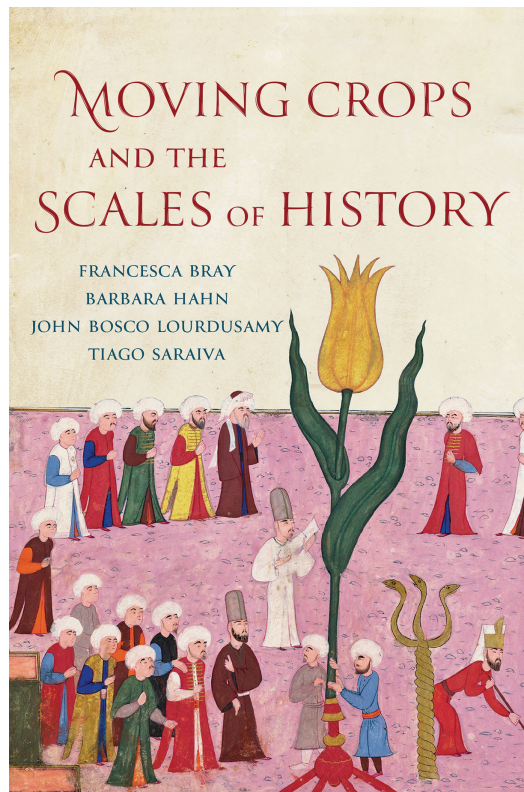
The second aspect consists of research on the movement of local crops in China. For example, according to Timothy Brook (2004), Zeng Xiongsheng 曾雄生 (2018), and myself (Du and Ren 2013), government efforts to introduce and promote southern Chinese lowland rice varieties to North China in the late imperial period proved fruitless. In one of my recent archival studies, I happened to discover that in 1958 the Ministry of Agriculture made a proposal to grow lowland rice in the uplands in northern China in order to increase the country's grain yield—echoing earlier attempts to bring lowland rice from southern China to northern China. Thus, if the period under study is extended to cover both of these two government programs, certain insights different from those of previous studies may emerge.

If a little nitpicking is allowed for such an excellent book, there are clearly some difficulties in compiling a book collectively written by different authors specializing in different fields, who decide to break the boundaries between chapters, and even between paragraphs. The pros of this initiative are to put the authors' respective strengths in crop history research into play, and to break through restraints of time,

3 Representative works include: Laufer (1919); Ho (1955); Wang (2010); and Li (2022).

scope, and language. One of the cons, however, is perhaps that the same crop can appear repeatedly in different chapters. Although we understand that these crops are used to tell different stories in different places, their repeated appearances make for a certain untidiness in the book's narratives. Of course, we appreciate that the authors intend to fully explain to readers the unique strength of the "cropscape" in writing global history with the help of a variety of crops. In other words, this new method of writing history and its theoretical narratives are what the authors focus on, while the stories in the book are examples to help readers understand the theory.

In sum, we hope that other scholars will be encouraged to pay attention to and apply the "cropscape" as an effective research tool going forward. Scholars can use this adjustable "video camera," changing variables by repeatedly adjusting the focus of the "lens" and changing the views in its "frame," concentrating on only one specific crop a time and comprehensively revealing its complex and hidden history. And to go a step further, it would be amazing if the "cropscape" approach could be applied to non-agricultural areas in the history of material culture, revealing unknown histories from new viewpoints and challenging our existing perceptions of history.



Moving Crops and the Scales of History

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