



## Unit 1 Overview

The world in 1750 was the product of a long and complex global history. Humans lived across most of the habitable world. In some ways, they did things the same as their ancestors—most people farmed, they moved around only a little, their states were some kind of monarchy, and religion was the most present large-scale community in their lives. Things were changing, but nobody was quite sure how they were going to change. This was signified by an encounter between the Qianlong Emperor and Lord Macartney.



**00:01**

*Kim Lochner and Colby  
Burnett in conversation*

So, you have the chicken fried rice and I have a pepperoni calzone. How global.

Okay, what do I owe you?

About \$17.50?

Oh, okay. Oh, that reminds me! Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Unit 1: The World in 1750.

*Colby Burnett*

Nothing is particularly important about the year 1750. It's not a more significant year in world history than 1749, or 1751, or even 1650 or 1550. So why do we use this year as a marker to start this world history course? One answer is we can honestly consider 1750 and the years around it as an era of transformation that laid the foundation for the world in which we live today.

**00:53**

*Animated timeline  
showing the mentioned  
events*

*Animated world map  
shows a smattering of  
yellow dots, representing  
human societies around  
the world*

The world we live in is the product of a long, long history. Our universe was probably formed around 13.8 billion years ago. Our solar system, with the sun and the earth, coalesced about 4.5 billion years ago. Life emerged on our planet about 3.7 billion years ago. Physically modern humans evolved much later, about 250,000 years ago. We have only learned to farm, to live in cities, to write, and to construct states in the last 10,000 years. All of this happened long before 1750. If we could have looked at the earth in the year 1750 from a satellite in orbit, we would have found a patchwork of human societies on every inhabitable continent. If we zoomed in a bit further, to the cruising altitude of a jetliner, we would have seen a lot of stuff that looked very different from today. But many societies in 1750 would look pretty much the same as in 1650, or 1550, or even 1450. In some ways, people still did things like their ancestors had for centuries or even millennia.

**01:55**

*Kim Lochner  
Artworks from around the  
world depicting farming  
and animal husbandry,  
as well as specialists  
making leather and paper;  
artworks of crowded  
villages*

*Montage of artworks  
depicting many types of  
sacred structures around  
the world (temples,  
churches)*

For example, in 1750, production and distribution of goods was generally carried out through well-worn systems. People still mostly obtained energy from the same sources as ancient societies—human power, animal power, water power, and, ultimately, the sun. Most people were still farmers who produced their own food. Only a few were specialists. Much of what these specialists made—leatherwork, iron, or paper—had been around for quite a while. Most networks were also quite limited and unsophisticated. Most goods traveled only short distances to market. Most people only knew other people from a few miles away and rarely traveled more than maybe a few miles from the place they were born. A few religious and philosophical ideas were spread quite widely, but most culture that people possessed was only shared with people in nearby areas. The communities of 1750 were politically varied, but mostly would have been recognizable to visitors from a thousand years before. People lived in kingdoms, chiefdoms, and religious states. Religion played a central role in most peoples' lives, like it had for many centuries. Most large religions were hundreds or even thousands of years old.

**03:22**

*Colby Burnett*

*Drawn diagrams of new  
technology*

The world of 1750 was changing. Steam power engines emerged for the first time as inefficient little experiments in China. Then more effective experiments appeared in Europe. These engines promised new types and amounts of energy. New products were produced at greater rates, including complicated tools like microscopes, innovative weapons like the flintlock musket, and new medicines like quinine for malaria. These innovations and the people who carried them moved

further and faster around the world.

**03:50**

Colonization decisively linked the Americas to Europe, Asia, and Africa only a few centuries previously. Trade networks and colonization were even starting to integrate Polynesia and Oceania into this system. Scholars who had travelled along these routes were using their new knowledge to imagine new kinds of communities. These were more representative, more democratic, or were more imperial and exploitative.

**04:17**

*Kim Lochner*

*Animation of a birds-eye view of a society. There is one person that looks to be a noble, and one person that is farming*

So, in what ways was this world of 1750 a story of shared human experience, and in what ways were there distinct and unique regional and local experiences?

This question can only be answered by zooming in further to a bird's-eye view to look at what humans were experiencing in the vast variety of states and societies of this time. At this scale, we see encounters between representatives from societies on opposite sides of the world.

**04:51**

*Artwork depicting the British diplomat is contrasted with artwork depicting the vast Chinese empire*

Not too long after 1750, for example, a British diplomat named Lord Macartney visited the Chinese court of the Qianlong Emperor. The meeting didn't go well. The emperor refused Macartney's request to open trading relations between the two countries. They each understood this failure very differently. The British diplomat, representative of a small state but one growing in power and eager for trade, could not understand why the Chinese weren't eager to sell British consumers their porcelain, tea, and fine cloth. The emperor, ruler of a vast domain whose economy was based on land, not trade, saw little to gain in trading with this small, upstart country with nothing to offer.

**05:39**

*Colby Burnett*

*Artwork shows people of the Mughal empire, as well as British trade ships*

*Many artworks depict trade going on between British and Bengali merchants*

Ironically, the place that would ultimately connect British and Chinese economies was not in either country. It was Bengal, in India. Until the mid-18th century, Bengal had been just one province of the Mughal Empire that dominated India. Mughal emperors were not as averse to British trade as the Chinese Qianlong emperor. Beginning in 1696, they granted a group of British merchants rights to trade in Bengal. These British merchants—called the British East India Company—found wealthy Bengali merchant families eager to deal with them. By 1750, the Bengali port city of Calcutta had swelled to over 120,000 people. Together, British and Indian merchants were building a modern city at the heart of an ancient trade route. Cloth from the region, made by Indian weavers and carried on British ships, traveled around the world, along with opium grown in the surrounding countryside. Yet despite the cooperation between Bengali and British merchants, this was not an equal partnership. In 1757, war between the Mughal emperors and the British East India Company resulted in Bengal becoming the first colonial possession of the British Indian empire.

**06:48**

*Drawing of an Opium War; artwork depicting Britain, Bengal, and China are contrasted with one*

Britain would eventually use the wealth of Bengal, and in particular its opium, to break open trade with China. We'll encounter that story later in this course, when we look at the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century. Britain, Bengal, China—three different regions of the world, with vastly differing cuisines, lifestyles, music, and politics. But, by 1750, these three societies were becoming closely linked, even when some resisted those links. We get some sense of their connection by looking

*another*

**07:30**

*Colby Burnett.*

*Animated map shows trade routes: We see many British ships that traveled around Southern Africa to India*

at voyages of ships between these regions.

This map shows just British ship journeys around the world in the half-century after 1750. The huge fleets of ships leaving Britain went many places. A great number went around southern Africa to India, including Bengal. But the data is incomplete. Most of the shipping between Bengal and other parts of Asia, including China, was in fact carried on Asian-owned ships, and we don't have a complete set of records for these journeys. A more complete version of this map would show even denser networks of trade linking Britain to India and China.

Societies all over the world were connecting in similar ways in 1750. Africa, the Americas, Europe, Asia, Polynesia, Oceania, were all connecting. But these connections happened in an uneven way. Some regions integrated rapidly, others came together slowly and fitfully. Within each region, some people quickly adopted new cultures and ideas, and others resisted.

**08:29**

*Kim Lochner*

*Artwork shows British men and ships in Bengal*

All of these reactions, from embracing change to resisting it, contributed to shifts in the way people understood and lived in communities; to the building of networks of exchange across the world; and to the production of new goods and their distribution over larger and larger trade networks.

Not too long ago, historians described world history from 1750 to the present as the "Rise of the West" and its main story was one in which European and North American countries like Britain, innovated their way to global power. But the relationship between Britain, Bengal, and China shows this history was more complicated, more entangled, and more global. And this story is just one of the many entangled global stories in this era.

**09:25**

*Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation*

Together, these stories give us a picture of how many ideas and institutions of the world in which we live emerged in this time: the nation-state, industrialized economics, modern imperialism, capitalism, and, later, socialism. The mid-18th century was the nursery of these modern institutions, and that is why we begin this course in 1750.

Wow, this is a lot to digest.

Oh, need an antacid?

No, I meant all the massive changes to human existence in the last couple of centuries.

Oh, I knew that.

Is that one orange?

Yeah.