

Chinese Traditions and Big History

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Abstract

The article first points out that Big History, according to the Chinese historians' perception, fails to unite natural and human history. In short, it contextualizes without necessarily connecting. It then discusses this failure in light of the traditional Chinese concept and practices of 'unity of Heaven and humanity', which manifests itself in the historiography of Sima Qian and in such technological feats as the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, as well as in scholarly ambitions as exemplified by Zhang Zai of the Song Dynasty. Finally, the paper elaborates on another Chinese traditional notion of diversity and harmony, which, hopefully, can contribute to further development of Big History, especially in China.

Keywords: Big History, China, unity of Heaven and humanity, diversity, harmony.

At the Seoul Asian Association of World Historians (AAWH) Congress, April 26–29, 2012, I talked about the reasons why Big History has been, sadly enough, neglected in China so far. For one thing, David Christian's now classic *Maps of Time*, despite being translated into Chinese and published as early as 2007, has not generated much attention. Today, instead of repeating the sad story of looking backwards, I will look forward and anticipate the future of Big History by reflecting on the Tao or the Way of Big History in China.

But anyway, a recap of my major points for why Big History has been neglected seems in order, because these are closely connected with what I am going to talk about in the present paper. First, conceptually, the Chinese concern for unity of natural and human histories is a task which Big History, as practiced in the West, has so far failed to fulfill. Second, in institutional terms, there is a separation of scientific and sociocultural histories in Chinese universities and research institutions. Thirdly, at present in China, pragmatic rather than cosmic concerns grow faster, like the one of sustaining its high economic growth. And fourthly, one can speak about the lack of attention on the side of the Chinese historians to the few Big History books published so far.

I know that many Big Historians, including David Christian, are indignant about the first point, namely, why the Chinese scholars regard

Big History as failing to live up to its promise of uniting natural and human histories, the 'fact' positively confirmed by no less a world history figure than William McNeill! (Christian 2011: xv) Therefore, I will focus on this point in my contribution. In a certain sense, I argue that before human beings are energized and obliged to fly to another planet to colonize and to settle on, they have a lesson to learn, a lesson which is, perhaps, also of value even if they do succeed in colonizing another planet in the cosmos.¹ And that is the lesson of the Chinese 'unity of Heaven and humanity', something that is often regarded as the very core and kernel of the Chinese civilization. I will substantiate this by an example of how the Chinese deal with human-nature relationship and another example of what Chinese scholars aspire for in their scholarly undertaking. Finally, I will try to elaborate a little bit on the Chinese ideal of harmony in diversity, which may also be of service to Big History on its way to winning the heart and soul of the world's peoples, especially the Chinese.

Why Big History does not Unite Natural and Human Histories

First, why do the Chinese think that Big History has failed to unite natural and human history? And as you will see, I will not go into details, but only categorically outline the argument structure.

Big History contextualizes but does not necessarily connect. Big History puts all humanity, nay, all living beings, within a larger cosmic context, for sure. But in what ways are human and natural histories united?

Big History, to be sure, does put forward a number of key concepts or central threads in an effort to connect, but these concepts are neither fully elaborated nor effectively employed in its narrative. For example, David Christian, in his *Maps of Time*, does point to 'collective learning' as an 'emergent' property of *Homo sapiens*, but obviously leaves it as such, probably as an indication of possible directions for further research. The same is true of Fred Spier's 'Goldilocks conditions' and Eric Chaisson's 'density of energy flow'. In other words, these, especially the latter two, sound rather more 'scientific' than 'humane'.

If human history is reduced to spasms of 'energy flow', in an obvious attempt to debunk the various kinds of human superiority or centrist rhetoric, it naturally leads to accounts where humanity is seriously

¹ David Christian and others have argued convincingly that '[n]o complex species is likely to survive intact for more than a few million years'... and we humans 'would be well-advised to hop a spaceship to another solar system' in due time. See <http://www.ibhanet.org/>.

marginalized, as a pitifully negligible creature in a larger cosmic framework.² These may turn out to be superficial Chinese 'impressions', but they are not at all pleasing to the Chinese, who always insist on putting humanity first, or at least on a par with the Grand Design of nature.

We can argue that Big History arises in reaction to World History not living up to its name, rampant postmodernist nihilistic tendencies, and cycles of prevalent crises confronted by humanity as a whole. But even so, more thought need to be given to defining human nature and to coordinating collective human behavior so as to combat these unwholesome tendencies and crises in order to realize a more harmonious and sustainable existence.

The Chinese 'Unity of Heaven and Humanity' and Its Implications for Big History

This failure on the part of Big History is most obvious if we put it under the spotlight of the Chinese concept and practice of 'unity of Heaven and Humanity' (Zhao 2002: 5-17; Wu 2000: 3-7; Ho 1991: 139-146). In fact, most recently, three leading Confucian thinkers - Qian Mu of Taiwan, Feng Youlan of Mainland China, and Tang Junyi of Hong Kong - independently made conclusions that the most significant contribution that the Confucian tradition, in fact, Chinese culture in general, can make to the global community, is the idea of the 'unity of Heaven and Humanity' (Tu 2001: 243-264).

Now, what is the 'unity of Heaven and Humanity'? (Chan 2011: 64-77; Chan 2012: 106-120; Cheng 1984: 95-98)

Sima Qian and His Successors

To understand this concept, let us first turn to the first historian in China, Sima Qian (145-90 BCE). In his now much publicized, *Letter to Jen An* (Sima Qian 1965: 95-102; 1993: 236; Ban Gu 2005: 2068-2069; Chang 1981: 157; Wang 1999: 293) Sima Qian clearly stated his purpose of writing history:

To inquire into the relationship between Heaven and humanity, to comprehend the vicissitudes of past and present, and to form a single narrative of it all.

² *Editors' note:* We have referred the author to several works in Big History, including some major ones, that do not reduce Big History or humankind in such a way, since they classify human society as one of the most complex things in the Universe, rather than being the product of 'a pitifully negligible creature'. We ultimately leave the author's assertions to the judgement of the reader.

Now, intuitively, the critical issue is our understanding of 'Heaven'. What does 'Heaven' mean? According to one interpretation, the 'heaven' here is Nature, and Sima Qian was doing nothing short of uniting natural and human histories to construct his own version of 'Big History'. Moreover, Sima Qian was ready to justify the relationship between Heaven and humanity, to forge a coherent story of the past and present, and to shape out his own narrative from prevailing narratives (Huang 1997: 72-75).

Of course, besides denoting Nature, 'heaven' can mean a host of other things, like 'God', the 'Mandate of Heaven', 'morals', 'strength', and 'strategy' – and can refer to aspects of each of these things all at the same time, sometimes tinkering with political justification (Wang 2008a: 64-66; 2008b: 80-85). And, as you can see, even the talk of the 'Mandate of Heaven' entails a 'correlative' or 'coordinative' relationship between humanity and Heaven. The British scientist Joseph Needham calls this kind of 'correlative thinking' or 'coordinative thinking' the very heart of traditional Chinese cosmology (Henderson 1984: xiv-xv; Needham 1956: 280-281; Tang 1988: 321-322). Or in his own words:

In coordinative thinking, conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a pattern, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of 'inductance'... The symbolic correlations or correspondences all formed part of one colossal pattern (Needham 1956).

This 'colossal pattern' is made most explicit by the sixth century BCE Daoist philosopher Laozi in his *Daodejing* (Sima Qian 2006: 388; Lai 2006: 7; Henderson 1984: 35).

The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth. The ways of earth, by those of heaven. The ways of heaven by those of Tao, and the ways of Tao by the Self-so [*ziran*] (Lao Tzu 1998: 53).

Yet, what is our concern here is rather the message and the philosophy underlying it, rather than the exact meaning of those ancient sages. The Chinese philosophy is said to have started, among other things, with the *Book of Changes* (henceforth *BC*), the ancient Chinese book of prognostication which is often revered as the first of all Confucian classics. Now *BC* considers a change as the only permanent thing about our world, and that 'a change communicates with the Dao of nature and the Dao of man'; further explications accredit *BC* as encompassing the 'Dao of Heaven', the 'Dao of earth', and the 'Dao of man', the first finds its manifestation in *yin* and *yang*, the second – as 'hardness' and 'softness', and the third – in 'benevolence' and 'righteousness'. What is more im-

portant, the basic principles of the three are united, commonly determined by forces of *qian* (strength) and *kun* (yielding) (Tang 2008: 484–491; Mou 2009: 63–64).

Of course, one may easily discredit all this as a superstitious talk of years gone by, with no room for it whatsoever in our modern temple of ‘sciences’. But do not be so sure. The dualistic pattern of contemporary science itself may be problematic, while the talk of the ‘unity of Heaven and humanity’ involves a totally different mode of thinking, the one that incorporates the whole humanity, the earth, and Heaven in a grand integrative scheme of Oneness. In other words, the Chinese answer to this problem of humanity and nature is that nature and humanity mutually shape and condition each other through numerous rituals, consciously instituted or unconsciously there, so as to maintain a harmonious sustainability.³

So, the Heaven-human relationship continues to call for justification even nowadays, not necessarily in either the Chinese Tao or in the Western Logos, but possibly in other transcending alternatives. A more reasonable attitude is, perhaps, to give the past and the ‘other’ its own due, since – following the science writer Robert Matthews – the past may really be our future, as the past observations may turn out to be more accurate than we assume (Matthews 1998: 6–9).

More than two thousand years ago, the philosopher Yang Xiong of the Western Han (53 BCE – 18 CE) said: ‘Only he who knows heaven, earth and man can be called a scholar’ (Ye *et al.* 1999: 18; Yang Xiong 2002: 121). This sets a high demand on scholars, yet it is exactly this outlook towards which generations of the Chinese scholars have been aspiring – to be fully conscious of one’s place in nature and society, as well as of the interconnectedness that this consciousness provides, to live out the meaning of one’s existence in a network of duties and responsibilities, and to crave for a permanent harmony among the three.

One can guess that despite the vicissitudes of history and especially the turmoil of the modern times, this tradition of ‘uniting Heaven and humanity’ has never been lost to the Chinese, if not among historians, though latent. In recent years, it resurfaces again among Chinese non-historians. In terms of constructing China’s ‘Big History’, a most notable

³ These rituals demand more detailed discussions than allowed by a limited scope of the paper, for example, music and rituals representing the harmony and orderliness of Heaven and Earth (Wu 2000: 5–6). With science or logic alone and without these rituals, a harmonious sustainability can never be realized on earth, as Francis Bacon laments in the first of his Essays, ‘Of Truth’: ‘Certainly, it is heaven upon earth, to have a man’s mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth’ (quoted in Fernández-Armesto 1997: 203).

non-historian is the environmental scientist and professor Ye Wenhui of Beijing University and others who work with him. Ye unites, or at least, tries to unite natural and human histories as the two main threads of his 'Big History', and by doing so, has been able to delineate a miniature world history of barely four pages! (Ye and Mao 1999: 1-6; Ye and Song 2002: 1-4; Wang and Ye 2005: 10-13; Ye 2010: 106-109)

The Example of Dujiangyan Irrigation System (DIS)

To bolster this notion of 'unity of Heaven and humanity', let us take a look at the Dujiangyan Irrigation System.

This ancient irrigation system, located in present-day Sichuan province of China, was built over two thousand years ago between 256-206 BC by Li Bing, the governor of the Shu Shire under the Qin State, in perfect keeping with the principle of promoting harmony between mankind and nature. This is not the place for technical details and the ancient Chinese wisdom of ecology (Li and Xu 2006: 291-298; Cao *et al.* 2010: 3-13; Tu 2001: 243-264; Fang 2003: 207-217; Sima Qian 1959: 1407); what is relevant to us is that the irrigation system was designed and constructed in conformity with the terrain and topography of the river and the Chengdu plain and thus, it successfully simultaneously solved the problem of silt sedimentation, flood control, and water distribution, so that more than two thousand years later, with its basic structure intact, it still plays a crucial role in flood control, irrigation and water supply for the Chengdu plain in Sichuan province. Thus, it is regarded as 'a model of harmonious coexistence between mankind and nature', and was duly recognized by UNESCO as the World Cultural Heritage site in 2000. And amazingly, after intensive and careful researches since the 1970s, it was found that the design and construction of this ancient irrigation system correspond fully to concepts of modern hydraulic sciences. So, despite the inability of the ancient Chinese architects to travel through time to meet with our modern scientists, a due reverence for Heaven does connect great minds.

Aspirations of Zhang Zai, the Song Dynasty Chinese Scholar

Let us consider another example of the scholarly ambitions of the Chinese Confucians. Zhang Zai or Chang Tsai (1020-1077) was a Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Northern Song dynasty. In a certain sense, Zhang Zai lived a paradigmatic Confucian scholar's life, so when he died he had almost nothing to bequeath this world except a few memo-

rable lines showcasing the aspirations of his scholarly undertaking. According to Zhang, Confucian sages are capable of 'establishing the mind of Heaven and Earth, determining the destiny of human lives, restoring discontinued traditions of learning from the past, and commencing a period of supreme peace for one's descendants' (Tang 1988: 322; T'ang 1991: 55-57; Liu 2007: 69-73, 129).

If this is a little bit vague, we can move on to enjoy his highly esteemed 'Western Inscription' (Lin 2009: 58; Zhang 1997: 2-3; Chan 1963: 497-498) which begins with '[p]eople are my compatriots; things, my fellow beings' and ends with '[l]iving is following my nature; death, my tranquility' (Tang 1988: 321-322). Thus, when alive, one should fulfill the responsibility of realizing the ideal of 'great harmony', and thus one can enjoy serenity without feeling shame or regret till the end of one's life. One can argue that this notion of the 'unity of Heaven and humanity' probably plays the role of a religion for the well-cultivated Chinese, if not the Chinese in general: it puts them in the domain of eternity; it defines clear duties and obligations for them in life; and it brings them solace and tranquility in death.

The Chinese Notion of Harmony in Diversity

And finally, let us elaborate on the Chinese notion of harmony in diversity. In the West, especially in academic debates, people would say 'we agree to disagree', and to be sure, we also disagree to agree. That is why in my most recent essay I cautioned that 'Big History should not proceed in such a way that other historians take Big History to be nothing, whereas Big Historians take history to be nothing else' (Sun 2013). But still that may sound more like a political expediency. If we go deeper, we may find in it the Chinese philosophical position which is more ontological and basic. The expression goes as *heshi shengwu, tong ze buji*, or in English, 'Harmony generates and sameness stifles vitality' or in another interpretation, 'Harmony fosters diversity, homogeneity undermines sustainability'.

There is a story about the emergence of this concept, as recorded in *Guo Yu*, China's earliest history book of the Spring and Autumn Period by historian Zuo Qiuming (ca. 502 - ca. 422) of the State of Lu. It says:

Duke Huan of Zheng asks: 'Will the Zhou Dynasty fall?' Shi Bo or Count Shi replies: 'This is for sure... Since King You of Zhou has abandoned the upright and virtuous and takes a fancy for those mean and treacherous. He rejects those who disagree with him and accept only those sharing the same opinion as his. Now harmony

fosters diversity, homogeneity undermines sustainability. This means that the coming together of different things creates harmony, which in turn nourishes things; and if you add up things of the same nature, they will sustain for a while and then perish' (Guoyu 1978: 515–516; Zhang 1996: 43).

I hope this lesson is also of service to Big History, for it certainly wants to sustain in the harmony of diversity.

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