

A Big History of One's Own*

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Citation | Yue, Sun (2024) Title.

Journal of Big History, VII(3); 52–65.

DOI | <https://doi.org/10.22339/jbh.v7i3.7304>

“In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be [mostly] retained.”¹

I know only what I know. What I know is limited, usually from that limited life experience that I have had, i.e., with the near at hand as anchor. I love those who gave me life and provide me with life's necessities, especially those with a natural inkling of attachment. I wish to see the due wish of each and every one of us humans be granted and satisfied. I like to see the world flourish on the order of its participants roaming freely as well as following rules and keeping promises. If I wish to know and experience further, to the point of knowing the whole, I have to rely on the effort and fruit of others, every one of them. And even so, what I finally fathom and get is something of my own. It's an exploration of my own self in a larger world after all.

Briefly here, I wish to say that big history suffers from not being criticized enough. To compensate for this, big historians are doing or to do two things: self-criticizing, and the construction of more big histories of one's own. This is an advocate, as well as an attempt to do so, from the perspective of a conscientious Chinese scholar, in the hope of inviting more potential big historians, to share their views and visions concerning how humanity has evolved and is evolving in the context of a changing universe. In other words, by doing big history, we are on our way to answering the question: How should humanity proceed in a conscientiously constructive mode of sustainability and harmony?, i.e., if ever that's possible. My own answer revolves around the playing out of science, love, law and order. This is followed by a suggestion of possible topics to be addressed by big historians in years to come.

The Emergence and Gist of Big History Transdisciplinary effort

When David Christian (1946-) of Macquarie University, in the late 1980s, was trying to catch the totality of history in his seemingly “creation myth” account, he was truly aiming at something big:

... I couldn't shake off the idea of a nontribal history of humanity, so I tried to figure out what such a course might look like. The prospect was daunting. To teach the history of humanity I would have to survey not just 200 years (as I did in my Russian history courses), but 200,000 years. And to do it properly, I would have to discuss the evolution of human beings, which meant introducing some biology. After all, you can't really understand humans without comparing them to other animals. So where did these questions end? Was there a point beyond which larger and larger frameworks ceased to yield new and interesting questions? If there was, I couldn't find it. To really understand human evolution, I realized I would have to study the evolution of other species, which would take me back 3.8 billion years to the origins of life on earth. That scale would help me understand the place of humans within the history of life on earth. But to understand the history of life wouldn't I also have to study geology and the history of the earth, and wouldn't that lead me to astronomy and, heaven help me, to cosmology?²

That was the beginning of and the reasoning behind what David Christian would later, hesitatingly, style

1 * A draft version of this paper was first presented at the online Fifth International Symposium themed “Big History and Global Evolution,” Moscow, October 24–26, 2023; and shortly later at the annual conference sponsored by the Center of History and Theory Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) themed “Western Historical Theories: Viewpoints and Schools of Thought,” Beijing, November 4, 2023. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), p. 2.

2 David Christian, “Big history,” in *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past*, eds. Kenneth R. Curtis and Jerry H. Bentley (Chichester, UK and Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 195.

as “big history”.³ David says he was “moved toward big history” because he is, “by instinct, a ‘framework’ thinker,” i.e., someone who relies on an overall theoretical framework to claim understanding.⁴ To achieve such an overall framework, David turned to his colleagues for help: astronomer David Allen, biologist David Briscoe, paleontologist Mike Archer, anthropologists Annette Hamilton, Bob Norton, and Ian Bedford, et al, as he listed in his reflections decades later. [I wonder why, as a gesture of academic courtesy, he did not trouble to seek help from mythologists, philosophers or theologians, for, “[i]n the past, at least,” such “big” questions “have been the preserve mainly of mythologists, theologians, metaphysicians, and philosophers of history. Is it possible that the situation is now changing?”⁵] Meanwhile, he and his historian colleagues “struggled to integrate the complex and contested narratives of human history into the larger narrative of big history.”⁶

Narrative threads

The “integration” of all human knowledge in service of the above goal is never an easy job. What the pioneering big historians do is to unify their narratives by way of a number of threads or structural principles, like “transmutations”, “fractal”, “equilibrium systems”, “regimes”, “punctuated equilibria”, “constructal law”, “combogenesis”,⁷ etc. David Christian’s narrative threads are “a series of threshold moments” – “moments that see sudden forms of complexity appear,” like the Big Bang, the stars, the origins

of the solar system, the emergence of life on Earth, etc., plus “collective learning” (the ability to share knowledge over space and time), a power that is unique to us humans.⁸

David describes big history as “the transdisciplinary study of the entire past – not just of humanity or even the earth, but of the entire universe.”⁹ The official website (<https://bighistory.org>) of the International Big History Association – established in 2010 – claims: Big history seeks to understand the integrated history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity, using the **best** available empirical evidence and **scholarly** methods. Gradually, big history has assumed the following structure, following the IBHA (International Big History Association, founded in 2010) official website:

Beginning about 13.8 billion years ago, the story of the past is a **coherent** record that includes a series of great thresholds. Beginning with the Big Bang, Big history is an **evidence-based** account of emergent complexity, with simpler components combining into new units with new properties and greater energy flows.

The bold-fonted words – bold-fonted by this author – around here are highly suspicious: Are these a description of “facts” or are they simply a stance or aim chosen by the authors? Or how good or coherent is the job done? Questions like these certainly merit more serious arguments and debates. But anyway, the first ever big history textbook,¹⁰

3 David Christian, “The Case for ‘Big History’,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 223-238; Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “Big History,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Nov., 2002), p. 16.

4 Christian, “Big history,” pp. 191-193, quote on p. 191.

5 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 1996). Review by Bruce Mazlish, “Big Questions? Big History?,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 1999), pp. 232-248, quote on p. 232.

6 Christian, “Big history,” pp. 196-197.

7 Sun Yue, “Big History,” in *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method*, eds. Stefan Berger, et al (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350970847.044>.

8 Ian Hesketh, “The Story of Big History,” *History of the Present*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 176-181; Ian Hasketh, “What big history misses,” *Aeon*, December 16, 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/we-should-be-wary-about-what-big-history-overlooks-in-its-myth>, accessed January 28, 2022. For more, see David Christian, “Collective Learning,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability: The Future of Sustainability*, Vol. 10, ed. Ray C. Anderson (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing, 2012), pp. 49-56; David Baker, “Collective Learning: A Potential Unifying Theme of Human History,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 2015), pp. 77-104.

9 Christian, “Big history,” p. 190.

10 David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, and Craig Benjamin, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (New York: Mc-

obviously more weighty and authoritative, proclaims a number of “thresholds” as a matter of historical “facts” vis-à-vis big history periodization:

The first three: The Universe, Stars, and New Chemical Elements

The fourth: The Emergence of the Sun, the Solar System, and the Earth

The fifth: The Emergence of Life

The sixth: Hominines, Humans, and the Paleolithic Era

The seventh: Origins of Agriculture and the Early Agrarian Era

The eighth: Breakthrough to Modernity

More thresholds? The History of the Future

Running throughout the current mainstream big history narratives is the idea of “increasing complexity” or “emergent complexity,” a concept borrowed from Eric Chaisson, the Harvard astrophysicist, in his groundbreaking book of 2001, titled *Cosmic Evolution: The Rise of Complexity in Nature*. In this book, Chaisson defines “complexity” as “[a] state of intricacy, complication, variety, or involvement, as in the interconnected parts of a structure – a quality of having many interacting, different components; operationally, a measure of the information needed to describe a system’s structure and function, or of the rate of energy flowing through a system of given mass.”¹¹ Following this logic, some parts of the universe, including humans and human societies, become increasingly ordered and complex mediated by more and varied components and greater energy flows. This increase in complexity occurs despite the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which says the universe, as a whole, is becoming more chaotic.

“Modern creation myth”

David Christian says his wife Chardi and his paleontologist colleague Mike Archer suggested “Creation Science” and “origin story” respectively for what he was doing. And he later formally uses “creation myths” to describe his big history project.¹² By “modern creation myth” is to be understood what he calls a “coherent account of how we were created and how we fit into the scheme of things.”¹³ “Creation myths are powerful,” argues David Christian, “because they speak to our deep spiritual, psychic, and social need for a sense of place and a sense of belonging.”¹⁴ This was echoed by Fred Spier and Cynthia Stokes Brown, who refers to their own big history narratives as “cosmic world views” or “origin myths” and “scientific creation story”, respectively.¹⁵

So even at this foundational stage, despite the above consensus shared by big historians, big history exhibits rather personal stylistics. Fred Spier says big history should only be providing “the best possible academic narrative of the past,” that big historians should never get emotional or have anything to say about “right and wrong; how to act; and how to interpret it in religious, spiritual, or metaphysical ways.” He says his own “big history account” is very much like a “GPS device” – very different from “that of David Christian, or of Eric Chaisson.”¹⁶ In comparison, Eric Chaisson is more impatient of softer, weaker, wrong stuff in big history: “Will the IBHA continue to tolerate, if not pursue, baseless expressions of meaning, mysticism and personal belief, or will it embrace its own mission statement to use the ‘best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods’ to explore this newly emerging field that we all so treasure?,” roars Eric Chaisson in his swansong thunder.¹⁷ “Big history” as a whole, as Ian Hesheth observes, is ambitiously striving to be not only “a science, but *the* science” for all of humanity with its “grand

Graw-Hill, 2014).

11 Eric Chaisson, *Cosmic Evolution: The Rise of Complexity in Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 230.

12 Christian, “Big history,” 197, 199. Christian, “The Case for ‘Big History’,” pp. 228, 235-236; and David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1-14.

13 Christian, *Maps of Time*, p. 3.

14 Christian, *Maps of Time*, p. 2.

15 See Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), pp. 4-11; Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007), p. xi.

16 Fred Spier, “Big History is not an all-encompassing world view,” *Origins (IBHA Newsletter)*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Feb., 2016), pp. 3-5, especially p. 4. His “GPS device,” if it’s ever serviceable, is probably more for interstellar AI devices than carbon-based humans.

17 See Eric Chaisson, “A Pithy Rejoinder: My Swan Song Revisited,” *Origins*, Vol. IV, No. 11 (Nov., 2014), p. 21.

unifying theory.”¹⁸

From Eulogization to Little Criticism to Self-Criticism

High praise from elites

Big history's critics are scanty and few. This is probably because of the countless difficulties involved in addressing it – very few feel well trained to comment on such open and ultimate topics, for example, but perhaps also because of the elevation of David Christian's magnum opus, *Maps of Time*, by the late world historian William H. McNeill (1917-2016) to the like of Newton and Darwin. He said:

Maps of Time unites natural history and human history in a single, grand, and intelligible narrative. This is a great achievement, analogous to the way in which Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century united the heavens and the earth under uniform laws of motion; it is even more closely comparable to Darwin's nineteenth-century achievement of uniting the human species and other forms of life within a single evolutionary process.¹⁹

This is certainly great report, i.e., if it is true. But not everyone has agreed with this appraisal except, perhaps, the late Andre Gunder Frank (1929-2005);²⁰ one critic openly retorted: “Big history can cover all the time of the universe without equaling the achievements of Newton and Darwin. Combining different stories in a historical narrative and finding a scientific explanation for all possible stories are two different things.”²¹

But McNeill's real interest may lie elsewhere. As he continues in his introductory remarks:

The truly astounding dimension of Christian's accomplishment is that he finds similar patterns of transformation at every level. Here, for example, is

what he says about stars and cities:

In the early universe, gravity took hold of atoms and sculpted them into stars and galaxies. In the era described in this chapter, we will see how, by a sort of social gravity, cities and states were sculpted from scattered communities of farmers. As farming populations gathered in larger and denser communities, interactions between different groups increased and the social pressure rose until, in a striking parallel with star formation, new structures suddenly appeared, together with a new level of complexity. Like stars, cities and states reorganize and energize the smaller objects within their gravitational field. (p. 245)

Or weigh the words with which he closes this extraordinary book:

Being complex creatures ourselves, we know from personal experience how hard it is to climb the down escalator, to work against the universal slide into disorder, so we are inevitably fascinated by other entities that appear to do the same thing. Thus this theme – the achievement of order despite, or perhaps with the aid of, the second law of thermodynamics – is woven through all parts of the story told here. The endless waltz of chaos and complexity provides one of this book's unifying ideas. (p. 511)

I venture to say that Christian's discovery of order amid “the endless waltz of chaos and complexity” is not just one among other unifying themes, but the supreme achievement of this work.²²

So basically two things here: the degree of hierarchical correspondence, and life's irresistible urge to build order

18 Hesketh, “The Story of Big History,” pp. 171-172.

19 Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, p. xv.

20 See Andre Gunder Frank, “Universal History: Sizing Up Humanity in Big History,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 2005), pp. 83-97. Andre kind of reluctantly pointed out that “[David Christian] devotes scarce attention to life and evolution ... and none to their possible future”; he also said he suspected “that this earth may all too soon belong to the insects and/or single cellular microbes and viruses or others” based on the law of “evolutionary competition for survival.” (pp. 83, 94)

21 Wolf Schäfer, “Big History, the Whole Story, and Nothing Less?,” *Canadian Journal of History / Annales Canadienne d'Histoire*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Autumn 2006), p. 319.

22 Christian, *Maps of Time*, pp. xvi-xvii. McNeill's quotations of David Christian are from the same book.

despite of the more chaotic spell of the second law of thermodynamics, “woven through all parts of the story”. McNeill epitomizes Christian’s contribution as discovering “similar patterns of transformation at every level,” or as fathoming “a striking parallel” between human society and star formation, thus energizing new structures in an “endless waltz of chaos and complexity.” On another occasion, McNeill refers to it as a kind of skill: “finding patterns or principles that run across different levels of reality – physics, chemistry, biology, and human behavior.”²³ This comes close to the rather humane but vain attempt to give expression to a “theory of everything,” or more modestly, an integration of “domains of truth.”²⁴ Is such an attempt really obtainable by humans? This is neither the right place for an adequate argumentation nor the perfect platform to shine a brisk final answer. So, I prefer to leave it alone for the moment.

Why little criticism

Another reason why big history has been scarcely criticized is perhaps the nervous antipathy David Christian had shown toward prospective critics when big history was still very young: “Only when a modern creation myth has been teased out into a coherent story will it really be possible

to take the next step: of criticizing it, deconstructing it, and perhaps improving it.”²⁵

So, up to now, there have been barely four or five review/critical pieces²⁶ that address fundamental/larger aspects of big history, but even these have remained relatively unknown so far, except, perhaps, amongst members of the relatively small organization, the IBHA. Some big historians tend to ignore differences of opinions, alternative perspectives, and genuinely fear the jarring sound of criticism. This has hindered the growth of the big history movement. It’s high time for big history to be criticized, most desirably by starting with self-criticism.

Self-criticism on the rise

Initially, David Christian conceived of big history as “the exploration of the past on all these different scales, up to the scale of the universe itself,”²⁷ seemingly something brand new. Nineteen years later, he saw it as a “return of universal history.”²⁸ Twenty-six years later, he reconfigured it as “the modern form of an ancient project,” “debates” that “had their counterparts and echoes in many other traditions of historical scholarship,” “because big history sees human history as part of a much larger past that includes the

23 Brown, *Big History*. Review by William H. McNeill, “Big History in Brief,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (May, 2008), p. 302.

24 See William A. Christian, “Domains of Truth,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 1975), pp. 61-68; Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2000); John D. Barrow, *New Theories of Everything*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Matt Crenson and Nicolle Rager Fuller, “Strung together: Is There a Theory of Everything?,” *Science News*, Vol. 179, No. 9 (April 23, 2011), pp. 26-27; Lambert Zuidervart, *Social Domains of Truth: Science, Politics, Art, and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023); etc. As an interesting aside, William H. McNeill in his autobiography once compared himself and his son to “John the Baptist, prefiguring a greater revelation coming from the hand and mind of David Christian.” John McNeill later says sorry for this. See William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Truth: A Historian’s Memoir* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), p. 157; John McNeill, “William H. McNeill: In Memoriam,” *Origins* (IBHA Newsletter), Vol. VI, No. 8 (Sep., 2016), p. 7.

25 Christian, *Maps of Time*, p. 10.

26 Alex Moddejonge, “The Biggest Story Ever Told: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Historiographic Origins of Big History, 500 BCE to 2010 CE,” California State University San Marcos, Master’s Thesis, May 9, 2012; Nasser Zakariya, “Is History Still a Fraud?,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (Nov., 2013), pp. 631-641; Hesketh, “The Story of Big History”; Mark Lupisella, “Is the Universe Enough? Can It Suffice as a Basis for Worldviews?,” *The Journal of Big History*, Vol. III, No. 3 (Jul., 2019), pp. 123-140; Ken Baskin, “A Cosmological Crisis?: A Review of Nasser Zakariya, *The Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings*,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. III, No. 4 (2019), pp. 171-176. Allan Megill dismisses big history as less contributive to historical knowledge than it promises and that “a better approach to meeting the desire for large scale in historical writing is through more modest endeavors, such as large-scale comparative history, network and exchange history, thematic history, and history of modernization,” see his “‘Big History’ Old and New: Presuppositions, Limits, Alternatives,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2015), pp. 306-326.

27 Christian, “The Case for ‘Big History’,” p. 225.

28 Christian, “The Return of Universal History,” pp. 6-27.

pasts studied by biologists, paleontologists, geologists and cosmologists.”²⁹ More recently, David Blanks, an editor of the *Journal of Big History*, actually offers a new definition of big history that seems to take account the unresolvable divide between materiality and meaning: “Big history is a self-reflective, scientific approach to the entirety of the material and human past that is interdisciplinary and open-ended, which means that we can share broad assumptions about how the world works while disagreeing about what it means.”³⁰ These are important breakthroughs.

Occasionally, big historians disagree among themselves over fundamental issues. Fred Spier, for example, has shot at David Christian narrative pillar of “thresholds,” saying it lacks academic precision and is an erroneous concept for structuring all of big history, “fatally flawed and ought to be abandoned.”³¹ Meanwhile, Fred prizes his own approach in his book *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (2010, 2015), treading “along the lines of transitions to greater complexity while not prioritizing any of them according to a fixed and numbered scheme that was claimed to be valid for all of big history but while also paying considerable attention to the decline and disappearance of complexity.”³² David Christian seriously argues for the value of and the constant need to return to an “unified, all-embracing

knowledge,”³³ while Fred Spier diametrically retorts that “Big history is not an all-encompassing world view.”³⁴

Maybe as a result of this lack of methodological criticism, or despite of that, there have been open deserters, bare onlookers, and faint commentators surrounding the small big history camp. Eric Chaisson, among others, has sung his “swan song” to IBHA and perhaps the big history movement as well by publishing his final pronouncement in three journal articles related to big history – growling over its unscientific softness.³⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, whom Bill Gates counts as “among the most important writers” of big history,³⁶ and who was said to have attended the 2014 IBHA conference at San Rafael, California, in his well-known trilogy – *Sapiens, Homo Deus, and 21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, barely mentioned “big history” at all.³⁷ The over 300-page book of 2021 *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* has only one sentence on big history, that “it offers an interpretation of history on the largest possible scale, with human history seen within the history of the universe.”³⁸

In terms of institutional building, the big history program, started in 2010 as a required First-Year-Experience at Dominican University of California (DUC), has been

29 David Christian, “What is Big History?,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Fall 2017), p. 4.

30 Craig Benjamin, Esther Quaedackers, and David Baker (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Big History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 246.

31 Fred Spier, “Thresholds of Increasing Complexity in Big History: A Critical Review,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May, 2022), p. 55.

32 Spier, “Thresholds of Increasing,” pp. 55-56.

33 David Christian, “‘The keen longing for unified, all-embracing knowledge’: Big History, Cosmic Evolution, and New Research Agendas,” *The Journal of Big History*, Vol. III, No. 3 (Jul., 2019), pp. 3-18.

34 Spier, “Big History is not an all-encompassing world view,” pp. 3-5.

35 Eric J. Chaisson, “The Natural Science Underlying Big History,” *Scientific World Journal*, Vol. 2014 (2014), pp. 1-41; Eric J. Chaisson, “Practical applications of cosmology to human society,” *Natural Science*, Vol. 6 (Jun., 2014), pp. 767-796; Eric J. Chaisson, “Big History’s Risk and Challenge,” *Expositions*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), pp. 85-95, reprinted in *Origins*, Vol. IV, No. 11 (Nov., 2014), pp. 6-13. For a gps, see David Blanks, “Rocket Science: Big History and Cosmic Evolution: A review of some recent papers by Eric Chaisson,” *Origins*, Vol. IV, No. 11 (Nov., 2014), pp. 14-16; and Fred Spier, “Response to Eric Chaisson’s Big History’s Risk and Challenge,” *Origins*, Vol. IV, No. 11 (Nov., 2014), pp. 17-20.

36 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, translated by Yuval Noah Harari, John Purcell, and Haim Watzman (London: Vintage Books, 2014). Review by John R. Pfeiffer, *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017), pp. 215-216.

37 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014). Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014). Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016). Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016). Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018). Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018).

38 Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (ed.), *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 210.

discontinued. The Big History Institute at Macquarie University, Australia, where David Christian used to chair, is now disbanded. Only in Asia, has big history been sturdy and growing, thanks to the effort of Barry Rodrigue of the Symbiosis International University in Pune, Maharashtra, India, Hirofumi Katayama and Nobuo Tsujimura of J.F. Oberlin University, Tokyo, Japan, and Ma. Rubeth R. Hipolito of the Holy Angel University (HAU), Angeles City, Philippines.³⁹

But is big history simply a materialist account of increasing complexity mediated by energy flows? Or is it something **more** than that? Over the years, I have felt increasingly dissatisfied with the cartography metaphor (“Maps of Time” in David Christian’s jargon; I feel big historians should be authentic knowers and guides to human evolution, engaged keepers of humanity in this age of fleeting technology void of anchor, mis/disinformation and increasing listlessness.⁴⁰ I feel if big history is to move forward, it has to receive adequate criticism and reinvent itself. That was why I uttered the following call in my own review of big history:

Now, with an array of big history publications in place, with the formation of the International Big History Association (2010), biennial meetings in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 (the planned 2020 IBHA Congress at Symbiosis University in West Bengal, India, was postponed for one year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), the creation of the Big History Project (2012) supported by Bill Gates and involving hundreds of schools offering courses in big history, the publication of

the textbook, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (2014), coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Times of London*, and elsewhere, and the publication of the scholarly *Journal of Big History* beginning in 2017, it is high time big history were criticized, deconstructed, and improved upon.⁴¹

It is not at all surprising Hirofumi Katayama of Japan exclaimed that he has “long been dissatisfied with mainstream Big History, as represented by David Christian and other’s text, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (2014), and Fred Spier’s *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (2015),” “primarily because of their anthropocentric and modernistic characteristics.” And when he tries “to apply Big History to today’s global problems,” he finds it “difficult for mainstream Big History to critically understand and offer clear solutions to the problems of the Anthropocene.”⁴² And his aim, in writing this paper, is to introduce Wang Dongyue’s version of Big History, which was in turn built on the ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy of Laozi, especially his “doctrine of weakness.”⁴³

My own criticism of big history is that it transcends humanity to discover humanity, but it does it half-heartedly, with little room for non-materialistic or human spiritual pursuit, to the point of denying any such possibilities; or in the words of Ian Hesketh, “[b]ig History privileges the cosmic at the expense of the human, the natural at the expense of the political.”⁴⁴ More recently, I have

39 I am grateful to Nobuo Tsujimura for reminding me of the unique role played by the late Luis Calingo (1955-2021) in promoting big history both at DUC and HAU. Luis Calingo was Provost at DUC when big history was launched. Later he returned to his home country, the Philippines, and became President of HAU. Then he delivered its teachers to the 2017 summer institute of Big History at DUC. That was the starting point of Big History program at HAU.

40 The late Georg G. Iggers (1926–2017), whom I had been lucky enough to know and who gave the English name to our *Quanqi-ushi pinglun* [Global History Review (since 2008 –)] at CNU, confessed that he had been “an engaged intellectual” throughout his “entire adult life ...” See Georg G. Iggers, “Afterword: The Historian as an Engaged Intellectual: Historical Writing and Social Criticism – A Personal Retrospective,” in *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*, edited by Stefan Berger (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), p. 277.

41 Sun, “Big History.”

42 Hirofumi Katayama, “Wang Dongyue’s Weakening Compensation: An Asian Approach for Big History,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (2023), p. 33.

43 Katayama, pp. 33-34.

44 Sun Yue, “Transcending Humanity to Discover Humanity? A Critique of Big History,” *Shixue lilun yanjiu* [Historiography Quarterly], No. 4 (2012), pp. 49-59; Sun Yue, “The Para-Transcendence of Big History,” *Shixue jikan* [Collected Papers of History

reformulated my criticism as follows:⁴⁵

Big history's ambition of clarifying the fate of humanity from the larger perspective of cosmic evolution has added interesting insights to the study of history. Also, big history has the merit of stringing together all disciplines of human knowledge for the making of a modern creation myth. But big history has its limitations. As it stands, it is not exactly an awe-inspiring story, for at root it says that humanity is a product of stardust, that it has come, and that it will go away—not very much to soothe the “existential angst” that many acutely feel today. David Christian's “collective learning” has need to be more concretized. Fred Spier's “principle of tracing energy flows through matter within certain Goldilocks boundaries” seems to be saying everything when in fact it says little.⁴⁶

Essentially, big history in its current form lacks what is needed if it is to be of more, and longer-lasting, appeal to readers of history. As “arbiters of our own fate,” we, “the editorial board of life on earth,”⁴⁷ cannot hope to achieve sustainability if we do not even provide for a modern creation myth of sustainability for humanity. Akop Nazaretyan acquired, as a small child, the notion that “only the death of humankind as a whole could result in an individual's death.”⁴⁸ That is the logic behind human sustainability on Earth, or even beyond Earth, if humanity make it into the future: each and

every one of us is locked in a package of science, love, law, and order; even if we perish in the end, we perish with a distinction.

A Big History of Science, Love, Law, and Order A big history of my own

“Science, love, law, and order” – over the past few years I have been working on these four key concepts, and possibly in coming years I will continue to do so, for I have come to believe that

For humanity in the universe, history is nothing but the playing out of a few essential ideas, i.e., science, love, law, and order. ... Science means genuine knowledge of the world and being human; love is where the meaning of being human resides (formerly administered successfully by traditional religions for longer periods that we can imagine); obeying laws derived from the above (science and love) or even formulating rituals to facilitate law-abiding abilities naturally follows; and the end result of all this is order, a humane scheme in conformity with our perceived natural order, this last one coming very close to the traditional Chinese concept of “unity of Heaven and humanity.”⁴⁹

These key concepts are not randomly selected, but are the very essential qualities of being human, the distillation of a lifetime of reading, reflecting, crystalizing, meditating, on issues of the import of human civilizations. For, without science, in its primary sense of “knowing” or “knowledge”

Studies], No. 1 (2019), pp. 21-27; Ian Hesketh, “What Big History misses,” Aeon, 16 December 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/we-should-be-wary-about-what-big-history-overlooks-in-its-myth>, accessed August 28, 2023.

45 Sun, “Big History.”

46 The late global historian Bruce Mazlish (1923-2016) has a really harsh word for Fred Spier's *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 1996), saying: “The overall schema fails to impress. It is pretentious rather than persuasive. Its effort to provide a single, all-encompassing theoretical framework is unsuccessful, and its principle of regimes, empty. It is, therefore, in spite of its overarching ambitions that the book emerges as worth reading, a small primer on some of what happened between the big bang and today.” See Mazlish, “Big Questions? Big History?,” pp. 232-248, quote on p. 245.

47 John R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), p. 323.

48 Akop Nazaretyan, “A Quest for Immortality,” in *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations, A Big History Anthology*, Vol. II: *Education and Understanding, Big History around the World*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016), p. 177.

49 Sun Yue, “An Interview with Yuval Noah Harari,” *Xinjingbao* [The Beijing News], May 13, 2017, p. B05; Sun Yue, “An Interview with Yuval Noah Harari,” *International Journal for Transformation of Consciousness* (India), Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), p. 281.

– instead of its contemporary meaning of reductionist or even falsificationist knowledge, although these are often regarded as the surest knowledge that we have – we are left with nothing but chaos and darkness. I say science in this way because that is the way knowledge and/or wisdom actually *is*, especially from the perspective of comparative cultural or civilizational studies. Without love, in the sense of genuine concern among people (indeed, why should we?), we are left not only being forlorn and sad, but also purposeless and aimless. Without laws, both natural and human-made, and their accompanying rituals, we are barely a heap of loose sand. Without the right order(s), and of course, adequate comprehension of the right order(s), either cosmic, planetary, global, or intercivilizational, intercultural, international, interregional, interpersonal, we run immediately into chaos, to the point of threatening each other with the most deadly weapons we have.

A few years ago, I composed a short piece on the Tao of big history in Chinese traditions,⁵⁰ tracing the contour of the “unity of Heaven and humanity” in Chinese historiography, especially in connection with the changing connotations of “Tian” (Heaven or *ziran*⁵¹). At the Villanova University-hosted 2018 International Big History Association conference, I asked the question “Is there such a thing as love in big history?,” which was published two years later as a paper in a Chinese publication.⁵² In it, I discovered the following answers: Eric Chaisson says Not me, it’s none of my business! Fred Spier would say No! For love makes science soft and is to be avoided at all costs. Only the Cosmos ticks, with energy rate density. David Christian is somewhat hesitant: Well, maybe, when there is the fateful slip from “Is” to “Ought”. I myself say a big Yes to Love, arguing that it is Love that brings meaning to the whole

big history story and humanity. Then it proceeds to discuss the respective mechanisms for bringing love to humanity in Confucianism and Christianity, focusing on the frameworks of both traditional Chinese “big history” and the modern big history.

An example and invitation to contribute likewise

I promise to write more on this chain topic, on law and order in particular. And in doing so, I strongly wish that scholars from other cultures and civilizations would pose their own ultimate questions on being human and provide their own answers, for these constitute big historically significant issues proper. In other words, my own interest in big history is partly shaped by my own understanding of the Chinese effort to construct a humanized world. In trying to achieve this, the Chinese Taoist thinking comes closest to our big history vision, i.e.,

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures. (Chapter 1)⁵³

This showcases the Chinese perception of the beginning of the world from a non-reductionist perspective: there is no “Big Bang” here, only the metaphor of regeneration.

In the universe are four things that are great and the true king is first among them.

People model themselves on the earth.
The earth models itself on Heaven.

50 Sun Yue, “The Tao of Big History: The Chinese Traditions,” in *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, Vol. 1: *Our Place in the Universe: An Introduction to Big History*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Delhi: Primus Books, 2015), pp. 223-234.

51 For a most recent elaboration, see Yueqing Wang, Qinggang Bao, and Guoxing Guan, *History of Chinese Philosophy Through Its Key Terms*, translated by Shuchen Xiang (Singapore: Springer/Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2020), pp. 233-241.

52 Sun Yue, “Is There Such a Thing as ‘Love’ in Big History?,” *Shijie lish pinglun* [The World Historical Review], No. 3 (2020), pp. 215-236. Sun Yue, “Big History,” in *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method*, eds. Q. Edward Wang (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Sun Yue, “Big History and Little Big History,” in *Quanqiushi gailun* [A Introduction to Global History], edited by Liu Wenming (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2021), pp. 367-394.

53 Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, (eds.) *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), pp. 157-201, p. 159. For an interesting elaboration on the mysterious birth of the myriad of things out of non-being, see Liu Xiaogan, “The Notion of *Wu* or Nonbeing as the Root of the Universe and a Guide for Life,” in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, edited by JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 151-165.

Heaven models itself on the Way.

The Way models itself on what is natural. (Chapter 25)⁵⁴

The Way produces the One.

The One produces two.

Two produces three.

Three produces the myriad creatures. (Chapter 42)⁵⁵

Following the Way of the world, the Confucianists were in turn formulating and regulating “all under Heaven” to make for an orderly human society:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.⁵⁶

The parties, each in their proper realms, undertake what are proper for themselves. One finds in individuals, for

example, the pursuit of knowledge and love (complete knowledge, sincerity, and cultivated persons), and of law and order in regulated families and states and a peaceful world. Or in another syncretic pronouncement in the Doctrine of the Mean,

What Heaven has conferred is called the Nature; an accordance with this nature is called the Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction.⁵⁷

The appeal of the family is so great to the Chinese that it is almost impossible for them to think outside it, so that a millennium and more later, the Chinese philosopher Zhang Zai (1020-1077) was still constructing his meaningful world in terms of the family:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.⁵⁸

And the grand synthesis of the “unity of Heaven and humanity,” even up to today, is still considered as the highest ideal that the Chinese hold for this world, i.e., a state of “Grand Harmony,” as articulated by Confucius through philosopher Fung Yu-lan:

When the great Tao was in practice, the world was common to all; men of talents, virtue and ability were selected; sincerity was emphasized and friendship was cultivated. Therefore, men did not love only their own parents, nor did they treat as children only their own sons. A competent

54 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, p. 171.

55 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, p. 180.

56 James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 357-359. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1893), pp. 357-359.

57 James Legge, *The Four Books in Chinese and English*, revised and annotated by Liu Zhongde and Luo Zhiye (Changsha: Hunan Press, 1992), pp. 24-27.

58 Chang Tsai (Zhang Zai), “The Western Inscription,” in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 497.

provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment was given to the able-bodied, and a means was provided for the upbringing of the young. Kindness and compassion were shown to widows, orphans, childless men and those who were disabled by disease, so that they all had the wherewithal for support. Men had their proper work and women their homes. They hated to see the wealth of natural resources undeveloped, [so they developed it, but this development] was not for their own use. They hated not to exert themselves, [so they worked, but their work] was not for their own profit This was called the great unity.⁵⁹

And the highest aspiration for any genuinely serious Chinese scholar, in the words of China's Song Dynasty gentry-scholar Zhang Zai (1020–1077), is to help facilitate “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.”⁶⁰

Essentially, these programed messages are the architectural foundation of the Chinese civilization; when and if duly observed, these led to an “ultrastability” of the Chinese imperial grandeur though “the underlying structure focused on ‘administrative security’ rather than enhancing the welfare of the people.”⁶¹ Yet when operating at its maximum, it sees no match in terms of both efficiency and orderliness:

The coming into shape of a historical economic scenario is a long and natural process of following the bodings of Heaven and the patterns of time. Sima Qian the grand historian of two millennia ago made it very clear: The common run of people come to and fro driven by the lure of profit; they get what they desire based on their competence and strivings. This is as natural as water flowing downward, night after day; there is no rush for it, for it will come to you if you are least demanding. Therefore, those who are real wise simply let it be; next come those who would channel it; still next, those who would cultivate and regulate the people; and the least wise are those who would battle for it! The economic growth of South China ultimately surpassing that of North China in later times, turning the south into a “land of bustling prosperity and propriety,” is full testimony of the predictive validity of Sima Qian's “principles of economy.”⁶²

In 1987, Liu Zaifu, the irksome Chinese cultural critic, wrote a harsh criticism on the complementary Chinese Confucian and Daoist/Chan Buddhist “designs on humanity,” denouncing the former for ritually suppressing individuality through coercive norms, and the latter for relinquishing of will and desires from within. Liu champions a thoroughgoing humanism to counter the ritual order's deep-rooted master-slave disposition, egocentric focus on kinship, selfish departmentalism, and enslavement to status and “face.” For Liu, personal and national self-renewal depend on individual initiative and respect for

59 Yu-lan Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 202–203.

60 Zhang Zai, in Zhang Liwen, ‘Establishing the Mind of Heaven and Earth’, *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily), 19 December 2016, p. 2. The pithy insights of Zhang Zai have been shared by later generations of Chinese scholars and civil servants, including President Xi Jinping. When I mentioned this to Yuval Harari, however, he denounced that as “fantasies about a past that never existed,” and cautioned that “we should be very careful not to fall prey to nostalgic delusions.” This is cross-culturally unfair; for it is not exactly an utopian dream, and if the Chinese are truly enamored of this ideal and find ways to faithfully implement it on earth, it will be a true blessing onto the world. See Sun Yue and Yuval Harari, “Scholarly Exchange: Human Civilization Calls for a New Story to Bolster,” *Xin jing bao* [The Beijing News], May 13, 2017, p. B05; Sun Yue, “An Interview with Yuval Noah Harari,” *The International Journal for Transformation of Consciousness* (India), Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jun., 2017), pp. 282–283. Interested readers can turn to Ralph G. H. Siu, “Panetics the Study of the Infliction of Suffering,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Jul., 1988), pp. 6–22; and his *Less Suffering for Everybody. An Introduction to Panetics* (Washington, DC: International Society for Panetics, 1993) for a taste of what a leading scientist of Chinese cultural descent is leading up to.

61 Børge Bakken and Jasmine Wang, “The changing forms of corruption in China,” *Crime, Law and Social Change: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Apr., 2021), p. 248.

62 Wang Jiafan, “‘The Chinese Wisdom’ Must Be Sought from Its History,” *Shehui kexue bao* [Social Sciences Weekly], April 28, 2016, p. 8.

human dignity and equality.⁶³

Things to Do to Improve

The above section serves to illustrate this author's vision of big history, plus an example of the Chinese civilizational pattern. The gist of it is: big historically, the Chinese have pursued their vision of being human based on their own package of "science, love, law, and order," so to speak. It is one among a multitude of human civilizations. If more scholars from all human civilizations can step forward and share their own visions, our big history movement will be greatly enriched, and perhaps grow substantially as a result of this synergy of communication and dialogue.

Now I'd like to suggest a list of possible topics to be addressed by big historians in the future, or topics as I see fit for a big history treatment.

First, the problem of authority or expertise in knowledge integration or synthesis. In dealing with knowledge of the big history scale, no one can claim authority on all things. That's why, at this moment, successfully transdisciplinary scholarship is highly valued. Nasser Zakariya's *A Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), highly reviewed and recommended by Ken Baskin,⁶⁴ is a case in point. My suggestion is to welcome scholars of all disciplines or even non-scholars (persons deeply versed in whatever non-accredited learning or art, *fengshui*, for example) to join in the big history construction, including religionists of sorts. To be honest, I was not at all surprised to find so many religionists or even those fervent about setting up a "Big Religion" for all earthlings when I attended the first and second IBHA at Grand Valley State University

and Dominican University respectively in 2012 and 2014. AI might help, but it has to learn to treat knowledge in a humanely significant way.

Second, the traditional Chinese thesis of "unity of Heaven and humanity." In Tu Weiming's understanding, this embodiment of the universe encompasses the beginning and end of the Confucian "self-realization," to borrow a Western notion of the ultimate human pursuit.⁶⁵ The noted Chinese historian Qian Mu (1895-1990) of Taiwan, shortly before he died, and in fact in his last essay, singled this out as a possible contribution that Chinese culture can hopefully make to the world. Exactly the same conclusion was independently reached by two other eminent Chinese scholars around the same time, Tang Junyi (1909-1978) of Hong Kong, and Feng Youlan (1895-1990) of Beijing. This oneness of self with others and the totality of things under Heaven or in the whole of universe is a genuine big history topic that merits serious study in the future.⁶⁶ This pursuit of the oneness of Heaven and humanity, i.e., the categorical overlapping of cosmology, worldview and human aspirations I suspect, is exactly what the late William H. McNeill had in mind when he was praising David Christian for his unique contributions to big history.

Thirdly, the root of the human feeling of love, the family. Yanming An describes a "natural affection that universally exists in human life," i.e., within the human family, on the basis of which classical Confucianism develops a system of moral imperatives, which takes an all-embracing attitude toward humans in the world, viewing all of them as members of the same moral community, achieving universal caring in principle and real life.⁶⁷ In comparison, it takes Godly commandments to realize universal love in

63 See Liu Zaifu: *Selected Critical Essays*, edited by Howard Y. F. Choy and Jianmei Liu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 119-133.

64 Nasser Zakariya, *A Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Nasser Basem Zakariya, "Towards a Final Story: Time, Myth and the Origins of the Universe," PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2010. Ken Baskin, "A Cosmological Crisis?: A Review of Nasser Zakariya, *The Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings*," *Journal of Big History*, Vol. III, No. 4 (Oct., 2019), pp. 171-176. Zakariya's *A Final Story*, however, mentions "big history" only once.

65 Tu Wei-ming, "Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization," in *Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Roger T. Ames, with Thomas P. Kasulis and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 177-186.

66 See Qian Mu, "A Contribution Chinese Culture will Make to the Future of Mankind," *Zhongguo wenhua* [Chinese Culture], No. 1 (1991), pp. 93-96; Tu Weiming, "The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World," *Daedalus*, Vol. 130, No. 4, Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change? (Fall, 2001), pp. 243-244. For a Western elaboration on similar thoughts, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Victoria S. Harrison, "Oneness: A Big History Perspective," in *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self*, eds. Philip J. Ivanhoe, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 39-52.

67 Yanming An, "Family Love and Its Extension: A Comparative Evaluation," in *New Life for Old Ideas: Chinese Philosophy in the*

Christianity and other monotheistic religions. Rather handy and core examples are:

Jesus replied, “This is the most important: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”(Mark 12: 29-31, NIV)

“He answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Luke 10: 27, NIV)

Now, with family and home in crisis in East and West, North and South,⁶⁸ where do we turn to for such humanely feelings? This really troubles me, and the whole world. Without God or family/home, who really cares? Does “Big Religion” have Someone or Some Institution to whom I can place my heart and trust?

Fourthly, do the Chinese have something uniquely helpful to the world? My answer is certainly a Big Yes!, since the Chinese vision is holistic, process-and-relation-based, harmony-and-balance-oriented, serving as a useful alternative to the reductionistic modern science. In his paper, Hirofumi Katayama describes his “vision of Asian Big History based on Wang Dongyue’s weakening

compensation theory” as “relation-oriented, altermodern, and non-anthropocentric.”⁶⁹

Fifthly, possibly as a model case of the above penchant, *the Traditional Chinese Medicine*, often abbreviated as TCM. TCM is based on uniquely Chinese philosophy and yields concrete therapeutic effects. Concerning this, I have very intimate experiences, with all my beloved receptive to TCM. It works for them. Big History claims that it is built on the surest foundation of modern sciences, but the monopolizing modern sciences often relegate everything that’s alien to it as superstition, or at least something fishy, unfit to be trusted, like the TCM.⁷⁰ I will certainly work more on this topic, and it is indeed history that’s still in the making.

Sixthly, it is a pleasant though somewhat surprising fact that big history’s most enthusiastic fans are a group of scholars who call themselves *literary anthropologists* headed by the eminent Chinese scholar Ye Shuxian. These scholars usually pair David Christian (for his styling big history as “modern creation myth”) and Yuval Harari (especially in connection with his featuring humanity as a “storyteller” species), for they want to prove that the ancient Chinese practice of jade worship gave rise to much of Chinese cultural history,⁷¹ thus extending further back by several thousand years the origin of the Chinese civilization.

There are certainly many more such sparkling inspirations, but I can only share the above as they came

Contemporary World: A Festschrift in Honour of Donald J. Munro, eds. Yanming An and Brian J. Bruya (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2019), pp. 367-392.

68 Eva-Sabine Zehlein, Andrea Carosso, and Aida Rosende-Pérez (eds.), *Family in Crisis? Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 9-23. For a brief overview on related concern and research in China, see Sun Xiangchen, “Reestablishing the Significance of ‘Family’ in the Modern World,” translated by Xu Qingtong, *Contemporary Social Sciences*, No. 4 (2020), pp. 44-59. For more detailed studies, see Yang Xiaosi, *A Philosophy of Home: Blind Spot of Westerners* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010); Wu Fei (ed.), *The Holy Home: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Civilizations* (Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2014); Zhang Xianglong, *Home and Filial Piety: From Chinese and Western Perspectives* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Co., 2017); Liang Shuming, *Fundamentals of Chinese Culture*, trans. Li Ming (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), etc.

69 Katayama, p. 39. The same issue has another article on Wang Dongyue by an aspiring young Chinese scholar, see Ye Chen, “The General Law of Being. Article 1: Being of Interrelation. *Journal of Big History*,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (2023), pp. 47-62. Ye Chen promises a trilogy of three articles, the second of which is also published, see Ye Chen, “The General Law of Being. Article 2: The Being of Differentiation and Its Arising Issues,” *Journal of Big History*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (2023), pp. 47-64.

70 For a brief overview, see Jin Qiupeng, “Ancient Sci-tech Accomplishments of the Chinese: TCM with Its Own System,” in *A History of Ancient Chinese Culture*, eds. Yin Falu and Xu Shu’an, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1991), pp. 219-223.

71 For a more recent piece, see Shuxian Ye, “Jade Worship: The Primitive Belief Systems of Chinese Civilization,” in *A Mythological Approach to Exploring the Origins of Chinese Civilization*, translated by Hui Jia and Jing Hua (Singapore: Springer, 2022), pp. 173-198.

along in my brain. It's reassuring somebody is talking about "Big History 2.0."⁷² In fact, a most recent *Journal of Big History* contributes a special issue on Big History Periodization, which promises to "reconsiders big history fundamentals," such as "periodization"⁷³, and the succeeding issue – *JBH*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (2024) – more, such as the "problem with the concept of complexity", "free energy rate density" as complexity metric, and the "master plot of energy rate versus mass for a very wide variety of (complex) systems."

Now a brief recap. The further growth of big history calls for both contributors and critics. This is decided by its all-inclusive nature – requiring all human knowledge, and its pan-human concern – calling for locally-sensitive action apart from rigorous logic, both of which are often beyond the capabilities of individual authors. So far, Big History has received less than desirable constructive criticism; but the good thing is that more and more big historians are increasingly self-reflective and self-criticizing in an effort to improve. This essay is a call on more and more scholars from various cultures and civilizations to step forward and to contribute, by reflecting on their own civilizational contours, with the ultimate end of throwing all of us into a grand big historically significant cross- or trans-civilizational dialogue. My own formula of "science, love, law, and order" for evolving humanity in the context of an expanding universe is this: Tell us the truth, spread love among people, truthfully follow the rules we concede to, build an order that can last. This way, we won't regret even if we die. For this is the human lot.

The Chinese wisdom of living in this finite world of inconstancy is usually credited with that of *Yijing* or *The Book of Changes*, in a signature, as follows:

Because the universe is an open system that is self-generative and self-transformative, we must live with ceaseless change; Because changes take place all the time, we must find ways to understand their patterns and to navigate their complexity; In every moment, we must be ready to make difficult

decisions in order to find peace and comfort in life.⁷⁴

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⁷² I am happy to find that more and more big historians are conscientiously applying their own expertise and taking advantage of various forms of collaboration to advance basic theories of big history research. See, for example, Gregg Henriques and Tyler Volk, "Toward a Big History 2.0: A brief position paper," *Journal of Big History*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (Nov., 2023), pp. 1-4.

⁷³ Henriques and Volk, p. i.

⁷⁴ Tze-Ki Hon, "Chinese Philosophy of Change (*Yijing*)," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/chinese-change/>, accessed February 4, 2024.