

Wang Dongyue's Weakening Compensation: An Asian Approach for Big History

Hirofumi Katayama
J.F. Oberlin University
Tokyo, Japan

Correspondence | **Hirofumi Katayama** katayama@obirin.ac.jp

Citation | Katayama, Hirofumi. (2023) Wang Dongyue's Weakening Compensation: An Asian Approach for Big History. *Journal of Big History*, VI(1); 33–42.

DOI | <https://doi.org/10.22339/jbh.v6i1.6105>

In this paper, I introduce a theory of Chinese philosopher, 王东岳/ Wang Dongyue, and discuss the implications of it, reflecting on its possibilities for Asian Big History and as an alternative or complementary way of constructing grand theories of Big History.¹ I believe Wang's theory of weakening-compensation liberates us big-historians from a stereotypical understanding of our field. It enables us to acquire diversified perspectives on Big History and helps us overcome some serious problems that mainstream Big History faces.

Problems of Mainstream Big History

I've 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). My dissatisfaction is primarily because of their anthropocentric and modernistic characteristics.² The principal keywords of mainstream Big History are 'complexity' and 'collective learning.' As a result of this focus, the history of the universe is one of increasing complexity, where human beings of the modern era are placed at the highest state of complexity, or evolution, thanks to their abilities with collective learning.

Of course, I admit the amazing accomplishments of modernization and the greatness of humanity, but when I try to apply Big History to today's global problems, which complexity and collective learning themselves have helped to bring about, I find it difficult for mainstream Big History to critically understand and offer clear solutions to the problems of the Anthropocene. This is especially true for global, ecological problems like climate change and the loss of biodiversity, as well as problems of our information society, called *Dataism* by historian Yuval Harari (2015).

We can position mainstream Big History alongside the variety of complexity theories that arose in the 20th century, such as self-organization, cybernetics, dissipative structure, general systems, synergetics, autopoiesis, and spontaneous order. These approaches regard an organism and its eco / social habitat as *complex systems*, which evolve by adapting to the environment. Biologist Stuart Kauffman discusses the motivation of complexity in his book, *At Home in the Universe* (1995):

The second law of thermodynamics has been thought to be rather gloomy ... UNIVERSE RUNNING DOWN, HEAT DEATH HEADED OUR WAY, DISORDER IS ORDER OF THE

DAY It is not entropy but the extraordinary surge toward order that strikes me.³

Kauffman implies that an aim of complexity theory is to help calm humanity from developing too pessimistic a sense of a 'paradise lost' in the modern world.⁴ Astropysicist Eric Chaisson's use of the concept of 'free energy rate density' played an important role in this respect.

Free energy rate density is an equation that relates units of energy per time per mass, and it clearly shows that more complexity requires more energy (per time per mass). This is his key concept to 'reconcile the theoretical destructiveness of thermodynamics ... with the observed constructiveness of cosmic evolution.'⁵ He summarizes various complexity phenomena and assembles them into a unified history of the universe, thus laying a foundation for mainstream Big History as a history of increasing complexity. Chaisson does indicate the 'cost' of complexity – an increase of energy use and entropy – and shows that it is unable to overcome the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Unfortunately, he doesn't emphasize this last point, keeping his focus is on complexity increase and related structural changes.

In his book, *Origin Story* (2018), David Christian emphasizes the negative side of complexity as a 'tax,' as in a complexity tax or entropy tax. He argues: 'Increasing complexity is not a triumph over entropy.'⁶ The notion of an entropy tax is one of the most important keywords in his book, but complexity still forms the core of his story, along with the characteristics of mainstream Big History. Christian considers complexity to be a good thing. He feels a sense of crisis about the cost of complexity, but not about complexity itself.

Wang Dongyue's Weakening Compensation

Mainstream Big History is confined in a cage of modernization and its consequence – the Anthropocene. This is a reason for considering Wang Dongyue. Wang is an independent Chinese scholar, whose specialty is philosophy. The title of his main work is 物演通论 [General Theory of Evolution].⁷ An English translation is titled, *A Unified Theory of Evolution: Natural, Mental, and Social* (2020), and I introduce his theory based on this English translation.

The source of Wang's idea is from 老子 [Laozi], the famous Chinese scholar from the 6th century BCE. Laozi defined 'origin' of all beings as 道 [Dao]. Here are two key phrases from Laozi's work 道德经 [Daodejing], section 40.

First, 反者道之动 [Reverting is the movement of Dao]. Wang points out that Laozi believed human civilization was moving away from the Way of Nature – ‘losing Dao.’ So, Laozi advocated for a ‘return to simplicity’ or a ‘return to origin,’ to ‘discard wisdom’ or ‘reject knowledge.’ Wang calls it a ‘doctrine of doing things unintentionally.’

The second is 弱者道之用 [Weakening is the effectuation of Dao]. This roughly means that the phenomenon of weakening is the unfolding of Dao and the form of its realization. Wang calls it 柔弱论 [doctrine of weakness].⁸

Wang boldly applies Laozi's Taoist philosophy to Big History, especially in his doctrine of weakness, and makes a unique interpretation of cosmic evolution from this standpoint. His book has three parts – philosophy of Nature, philosophy of Mind, and philosophy of Society. He discusses his theme based on his broad Western philosophical knowledge.

Philosophy of Nature

The starting point of Wang's theory is the concept, 存在效价 [potency-of-being], an entity's strength or stability. Its amount is expressed by 存在度 [degree-of-being], which determines stability.⁹ When a degree-of-being is low, it means an entity is fragile and easy to destroy, but when it is high, it is stable and able to last for a long time in the universe. Wang asked: How is the distribution of the degree-of-being accomplished? There are five possibilities:

- Chaotic distribution – there is no tendency.
- Equal distribution – relative stability of each entity is equal.
- Wave distribution – each entity's stability has periodic wave movements.
- Rising distribution – a tendency to increase.
- Falling distribution – a tendency to decrease.¹⁰

Perhaps mainstream big-historians consider the evolution of the universe is in the rising distribution. For example, Darwin's evolution theory and his view that ‘the fittest survive’ seems to imply that the tendency of a species' degree-of-being is to increase. Surprisingly, Wang adopts an entirely opposite conclusion.

Entities in the universe have evolved from a physical structure of particles and atoms to chemical arrangements of molecules ... then biological beings emerged, followed by human beings. Wang sees this process of transformation as a tendency to decrease. He summarizes this as:

- 1) 相对量度递减 – gradual decrease in relative quantity.
- 2) 相对时度递短 – gradual shortening of relative existing time.
- 3) 衍存条件递繁 – gradual complexification of the sustaining condition.
- 4) 存变速率递增 – gradual increasing rate of variation.
- 5) 自在存态递失 – gradual disappearance of being-in-itself.
- 6) 自为存态递强 – gradual invigorating of being-for-itself.

Figure 1 is a diagram of an evolutionary gradient based on these tendencies. When an entity climbs up a gradient, mass distribution decreases, time-span shortens, and the complexity and differentiation increase. As for 5) above, *being-in-itself* means that an entity has independently existing power, while for 6), in contrast, *being-for-itself* means that an entity's existing power is so weakened that it cannot exist without supplementing itself with subsidiary attributes or structure.¹¹

Wang explains these tendencies with an example. Single-celled organisms, such as cyanobacteria, have the highest degree of being of all biological beings. Their volume is small but their relative surface area in contact with the environment is large, so they can efficiently absorb nutritional substances. Their growth potential and adaptivity is high. They occupy a broad area or space. In contrast, the more evolved an entity is, the lower the degree-of-being and the more complex the attribute-of-being it has. Wang expresses it concisely in thirty Chinese kanji characters:

体积小, 面积大 – Small volume, large area.
吸收多, 转化强 – More absorption, strong transformation.
生长旺, 繁殖快 – Vigorous growth, fast-breeding.
适应广, 易变异 – Broad fitness, easy variation.
分布广, 种类多 – Wide distribution, numerous types.¹²

Why do entities tend to weaken? And how can weakened entities continue existence? Wang argues that, from the very beginning, entities have been unable to sustain themselves sufficiently, so they have a tendency to compensate for their own inadequacy. This is the inner driving force of evolution or development. From this standpoint, every compensation is a loss from the previous degree of being, and this compensation and loss creates a positive feedback loop – compensation caused by weakening, and a weakening process caused by compensation. In consequence, as Figure 2 shows, the movement from sustaining being to 失存 [losing being] is the irreversible path of material evolu-

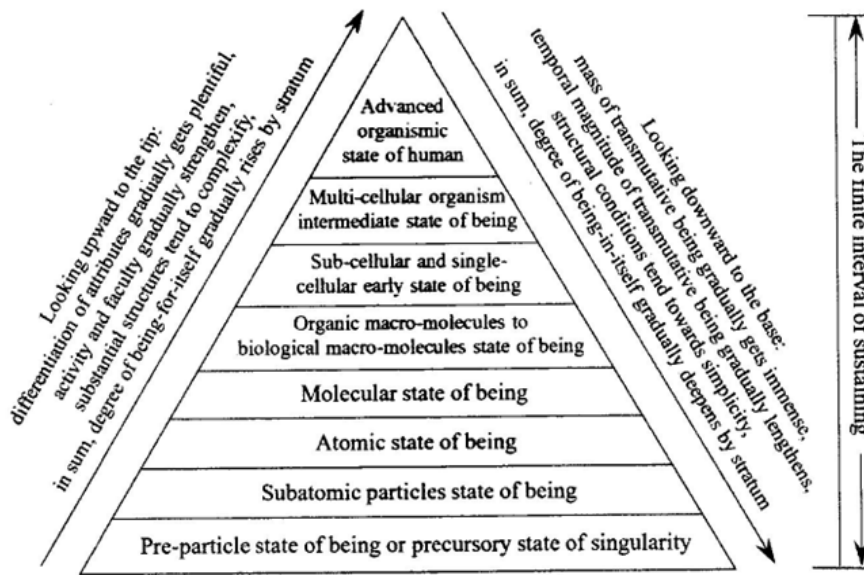


Figure 1: Diagram of Evolutionary Gradient. Wang 2020: 18.

tion. Wang calls this tendency 递弱代偿法则 [the law of gradual weakening compensation]. This is the most fundamental law in his theory.

In the diagram, Wang shows how the original-entity, which is unified, simple and stable, passes away, as its potency-of-being gradually diminishes and its 代偿效价 [potency-of-compensation] and 代偿度 [degree-of-compensation] gradually increases. The degree-of-compensation is a concrete indicator of the potency-of-compensation, which determines how any transmuted entity sustains its qualitative state of being while inevitably losing its potency-of-being.¹³

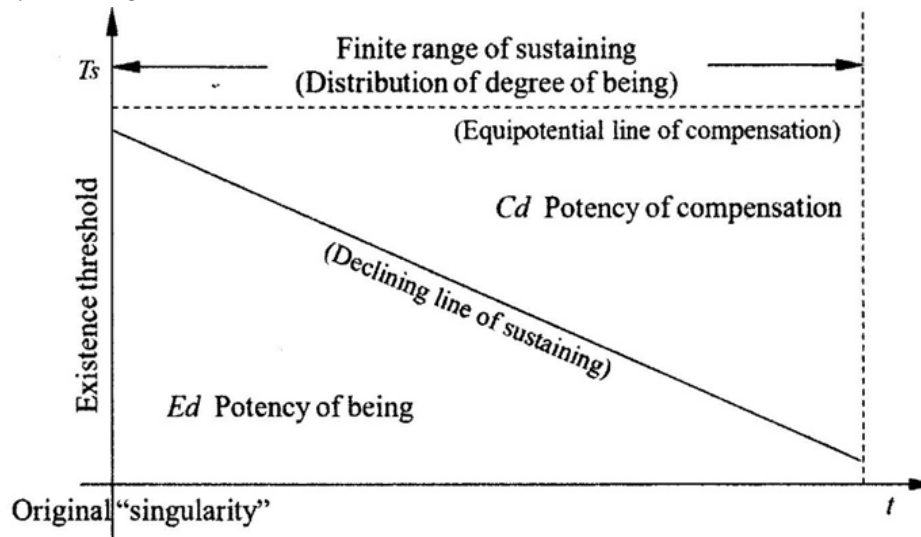


Figure 2: Diagram of the law of gradual weakening compensation. Wang 2020: 66.

What is important, especially for mainstream Big History, is that in this law: *Weakness bears an inverse relation to complexity*. Wang argues: 'all beings in the universe are gradually transmuted and bustle with activity and that attributes of being gradually rise in complexity, which leads to faltering instability.'¹⁴ These attributes express themselves in the forms of 'mind' and 'society.'

Philosophy of Mind

According to Wang, there are two ways for compensation to happen – acquiring new attributes or making a new structure with other entities. An attribute is an entity's qualities, and structure is an entity's interdependent form. All entities compensate their weakness by adding attributes or by forming a structure, which raises their complexity, and therefore weakens their potency-of-being, leading to more instability.

In this process, for social lifeforms, an entity's attribute evolved into mind and its structure evolved into society. According to the theory of weakening-compensation, the potency of any concrete entity inevitably tends to decay, demanding a corresponding amount of attributive-compensation to maintain itself. Because this process goes on irreversibly in the long run, it results in modes of attributive-compensation developing to an extremely complex level, which is the origin of mental beings.

Wang calls an entity's ability to sense and respond to outer circumstance 感应属性 [affective attributes]. Even the most primitive matter, such as electrons, have affective attributes – 感应 [affectivity]. This is the physico-chemical stage of induction. An electron gets into the orbit of a proton and makes an atom, which is a starting point of the mind. Next, this physico-chemical matter's attribute of sense-response evolves into the biological attribute of perception – 感性 [sensibility]. This is the primitive stage of lower biotic entities. They acquire a sense-organ system and neural network, which is the origin and foundation of perceptual physiology. 知性 [understanding] is the formation of judgement emerging in animals at the vertebrate stage.¹⁵ This is the source and foundation upon which humans established their categorized identifying response. And finally, 理性 [reason] is the

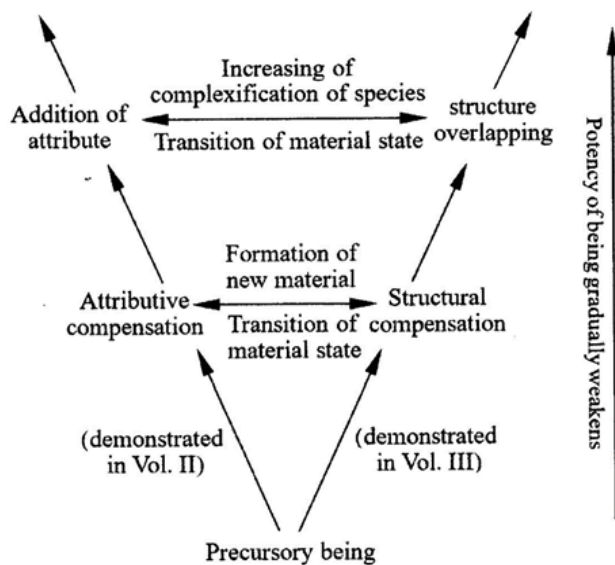


Figure 3: Pathway of parallel compensation for attribute and structure. Wang 2020: 38.

affective attribute in the stage of human civilization that uses symbolic languages.¹⁶

Reason is the extreme product of the 虚代偿 [virtual compensation] of affective attribute. Reason uses 理想逻辑 [ideal logic] for the thought of pure reasoning and thus transcends the intuition of sensibility and the judgement of understanding. Ideal logic has a plastic moving constitution of 伪在 [false being] and its unsteady solo progression presents a vector of 危在 [critical being]. Reason is the affective-attribute of the weakest and the most interdependent being.¹⁷

Philosophy of Society

Each weakened being not only adds new attributes to itself, but it also makes coupling linkages of mutual supplementation with each other and in doing so they attain the restructuring vitality of social-compensation. Society is the derivative carrier of the evolution of natural structure and the collective realization of the coupling of evolved attributes. Of course, this process also involves the Law of Weakening Compensation. The degree of being / stability declines, while structure and interdependence inside each group continually rises higher.

Society is the evolved form of structure, so we could say a molecule is a 'socializing' compensation of atoms. However, society's original meaning is related to life. An organic entity's physical attributive-compensation makes it weaker, and this requires organisms to develop social-structural compensation.

Wang points out three stages of society. 1) 初级社会 [elementary society] is that of single-celled organisms. The degree of single cells is rather high, so they live in the most stable natural society. 2) 中级社会 [intermediate society] is the social stage of all multicellular organisms from the Cambrian Period into the Quaternary. 3) 晚级社会 [advanced society] refers to civilized human society. Since intelligent reform transcends the space-time restrictions of physical variation, its degree of differentiation is extremely high, and the degree of survival of its social constituents is drastically reduced, thus making it rapidly approach toward the highest degree of biological social structure and the most unstable critical point of losing being.¹⁸

The evolutionary course of society is described in Figure 2. If the socially structured state increases its complexity and shifts from left to right, the individual and overall survival power of the species tends to weaken in biological evolution.

At the end of his book, Wang states his conclusion: "Human nature" is the expression of "all natural beings," and "human being" is the miniature of "the universe," or rather, "human being" is the latest weakened sustaining constitution of "the universe's evolution," which is the modern annotation of the Idea on 天人合一 [the integral oneness of Nature and humans] found in ancient Chinese philosophical thought.¹⁹

What does this Wang's phase mean? Isn't it another form of anthropocentrism? I do not think so. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said, γνῶθι σεαυτόν [know thyself]. Following the phrase, what Wang means is 'know thy weakness,' or, more precisely, 'know thou art weak.' That is, when you realize and admit you are the weakest being in the universe, you can see you are connected with, interdependent with, and supported by everything in the universe. This is the most important message I received from Wang's theory.

Weakening Compensation / Relational Big History

So, what implications his theory has for mainstream Big History? The first is the possibility of relation-oriented Big History. Wang's weakening-compensation shows that modernization and the complex structures that humans have attained express not only their strength but also their weakness. Wang says simple and clearly: 'Complex forms directly express the weak essence.'²⁰

In other words, we can say that complexity is a relationship. It is not a substance that belongs to any one being but to a nexus of beings. A being having more complexity means that it is connected with others in more relations. In this respect, we can distinguish two kinds of complexity – closed-complexity and open-complexity. In closed-complexity, potency-of-being is higher as complexity increases. In

open-complexity, potency-of-being is lower as complexity increases, because the sum of its potency-of-being and potency-of-compensation is constant (as shown in Fig. 2).

Mainstream big-historians also refer to the negative side of complexity. For example, David Christian argues:

It's as if entropy demands more energy from an entity if it tries to get more complex: more complex things have to find and manage larger and more elaborate flows of free energy. No wonder it's harder to make and maintain more complex things, and no wonder they usually break down faster than simpler things Increasing complexity is not a triumph over entropy.²¹

However, Christian doesn't put the relation-nature of complexity in his perspective and recognizes it only a closed aspect of an individual being.

Wang's theory has an affinity with relation-oriented theories of big-historians such as Sun Yue's 'Tao of Big History,' Lowell Gustafson's 'Big Politics,' and Barry Rodrigue's *mutualization*. Rodrigue argues:

Big History is a process of mutualization, since it results in heightened awareness of the fragile, mutual dependence between human and non-human worlds, between organic and inorganic regimes, as well as between microscopic and macroscopic levels – on Earth and beyond.²²

What Rodrigue states here is completely the same as Wang's concept of weakening-compensation. In fact, Rodrigue himself refers to Wang and argues:

Many scholars focus on complexity as a benchmark of evolution. While this is an important concept, philosopher Wang Dongyue reminds us of the fragility of complexity: as things become more complex, instability increases.²³

Wang's weakening-compensation doctrine and related-oriented Big History can provide a strong foundation for 'care' and 'empathy.' In capitalist society, especially that of neoliberalism, people have considered care to be of low or inferior value. Care means weakness and dependence, and is less valuable than capitalist-neoliberal concepts such as autonomy, independence, and competitiveness. The pandemic of COVID-19 all over the world shows how caring efforts are essential for our society and how they have been underestimated in our capitalist society. Political scientist Joan Tronto stresses the importance of care in a democratic society and defines care:

... in the most general sense, care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.²⁴

She points out that care is an activity rooted in the essence of our species as *Homo sapiens*. In addition, care is always relational. Interactions among people through caring-for, caring-about, care-giving, and care-receiving make us interwoven into the web of life.²⁵

Empathy is another keyword in the present world. The Anthropocene is an era in which we must reconsider what humanity is. On the one hand economic and cultural activities of human beings have influenced the Earth severely and have brought many species into extinction. On the other hand, astonishing development of information technology has caused AI to surpass our intelligence, which was formerly regarded our excellent ability compared to other animals. We have to redesign our relationship with other lives and AI, and I think empathy is an ability we should rely on for making new relationships. Animal ethologist Frans de Waal argues in his *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* that empathy is human being's profound emotion which had been built in the long evolution process as mammals:

As is true for many mammals, every human life-cycle includes stages at which we either depend on others (when we are young, old or sick) or others depend on us (when we care for the young, old or sick). We very much rely on one another for survival. It is this reality that ought to be taken as a starting point for any discussion about human society, not the reveries of centuries past, which depicted our ancestors as being as free as birds and lacking any social obligations.²⁶

Empathy can be a tie between us and other lives, based on our weakness as mammals. And, at least for the near future, AI cannot acquire the ability.

As explained, Wang's weakening-compensation offers us a vision of care, empathy and mutual support, instead of the jungle law of neoliberalism. The values of 'complexity-oriented' Big History are pluralism and diversity. Kauffman provides us with a vision of world civilization as a pluralistic global community, providing evidence that it is not merely a human creation but part of the natural order of things.²⁷

Of course, it is very important, but it is not enough. Paying attention to weakness, and admitting we are weak, allows us to find the importance of care and empathy. Weakness (and mutualization) is not only a description of the situation but also a way for us to change the world.

Altermodern Big History's Critique of Modernization

The second implication is the possibility of altermodern Big History. *Altermodern* implies an alternative way of overcoming defects of modernism, modernization, and the Anthropocene. Wang's theory urges us big-historians to question modernism, and the process of modernization, by an altermodern understanding of Cosmic Evolution. As examples, I share two of the most serious problems of modernization in the Anthropocene.

1. Humankind's Engineering Approach towards Nature

The basic characteristic of engineering is to control Nature – imposing a uniform framework of change from outside, regardless of a situation's unique characteristics or potential to change on its own. One of the most prominent examples is how we fill the Earth with artificial objects, such as concrete construction materials and plastics. This human-made mass – *anthropogenic mass* – currently equals ≈ 1.1 teratonnes and has been doubling every ≈ 20 years in recent history. In 2020, it surpassed all living biomass on Earth, equalling more than every human's body-weight each week.²⁸

The climate change we are facing will accelerate this process in a vicious cycle, because we tend to use engineering technologies to adapt to climate change, such as additional dam construction for flood control, climate engineering for climate control, and genetic engineering for making animals and plants endure rising temperatures. The future of the Earth may become a concrete-covered 'engineering planet.'

A problem is that mainstream Big History cannot criticize this engineering future, because mainstream Big History itself is a product of modernism and cannot escape its influence. Complexity theories regard engineering as a kind of adaptation, a desired complexity, and even sustainability. David Christian distinguishes two types of Anthropocene – Good and Bad. He argues that we should preserve the best of the Good Anthropocene and avoid the dangers of the Bad Anthropocene.²⁹ But, these are two sides of the same coin. It is modernism that has caused not just the Good but also the Bad Anthropocene. Without this recognition, we would improve the results of modernism by the method of modernism.³⁰ It involves the risk of making the engineering planet happen.

Obviously, we need another paradigm to supplement

mainstream Big History. Wang's weakening-compensation gives us a useful theoretical foundation to criticize the modernization process. The world becomes more and more destabilized with a lot of floods, wildfires, and droughts. The more we compensate our weakness by engineering, the more we become weak. Wang's theory provides a good explanation about how and why the engineering approach falls into this vicious cycle.

2. Destabilization of the Information Society

As Yuval Harari argues in his book, *Homo Deus* (2015), information and communication technologies interpret life and humanity as mere algorithms, and, in consequence, our existence dissolves into *information*. He asks three questions:

Are organisms really just algorithms, and is life really just data processing?

What's more valuable – intelligence or consciousness?

What will happen to society, politics and daily life when nonconscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?³¹

How should we recognize *Dataism*, a consequence of modernization, and how should we deal with its harmful effects? Mainstream Big History cannot provide good answers to these questions, because complexity is its principal criteria for judgement. Wang's theory can provide a critical viewpoint about this problem.

He criticizes *logos*, an important concept in Western culture. The term refers to a simplified, mechanistic understanding of how things work and fit together, and so it often is a conceptual abstraction of reality. According to Wang, logic (in a broad sense) has a 'logic-sequence' that includes 'logic-of-physicho-chemical affection' and 'logic-of-biological-instinct.' It reaches a final stage, for Wang, in logic-of-reason, the concept that people usually call 'logic' (in its narrow sense).

Wang sees logic as a product of weakening-compensation that promotes 虚化 [virtualization]. At the stage of logic-of-reason, mental activity becomes the dominant element of an actual physical being. This makes us weaker and, for compensation, we promote further virtualization. As a result, it leads to 危在 [critical being] and a subject's state of being becomes increasingly unstable – to the point of self-disappearing.³² Wang describes the negative side of information society, but he doesn't provide a solution.

To my mind, it is necessary for big-historians to reconsider 'knowledge' in collective learning. In the field of biodiversity conservation, for example, the knowledge of indigenous peoples is often regarded as important as scientific knowledge, because it is more concrete, contextual, and

often more harmonious with Nature. In Wang's terms, the degree of compensation of indigenous knowledge is lower than scientific knowledge, because indigenous knowledge has a higher potency-of-being. In this way, weakening-compensation corrects the tendency for mainstream Big History and complexity theories to impose ranks on things, according to its views of complexity.

Vision of Asian Big History

An implication of Wang's critique is an alternative narrative for Big History. Wang's weakening-compensation, based on Taoist philosophy, gives us new insights for unifying the connections between Nature, Life and Society, based on contemporary scientific knowledge. By doing so, he showed it is possible to interpret Big History in a different ways from the mainstream. We can call Wang's theory part of 'Asian Big History.'

I believe that Big History as science is one approach, but the field has more than a single unified perspective. What does the perspective mean? The celebrated Japanese Buddhist priest 日蓮 Nichiren, who was born just 800 years ago, said that hungry spirits perceive the sacred Ganges River as fire, human beings perceive it as water, and heavenly beings perceive it as *amrita*. Amrita is a drink that gives us immortality. Nichiren argues that, though the river is the same, it appears differently, according to one's mental state. Similarly, we can see the Ganges of Big History differently, according to our cultural background and practical position.

My own vision of the Ganges is a form of 'Buddhist Big History.' Wang's concept of potency-of-being has a sense of respect for Nature, respect for all life, and respect for all nonliving beings. Buddhism has embodied this idea in the concept of 仏性 [Buddhahood].³³ Later, Japanese Tiantai [天台], a 6th century BCE East Asian form of Mahayana Buddhism, developed the idea by adapting it to everything in the universe and summarized it in the word 草木国土悉皆成仏, which means that grasses, trees and lands, indeed all beings, have Buddhahood.

As an example, let me share a poem that shows the viewpoint of Buddhist Big History. This poem, 大漁 [Big Catch], is a work of Japanese poet 金子みすゞ Misuzu Kaneko (1903–1930).³⁴ It is well-known in Japan, because you can see it in Japanese textbooks, even for elementary schools.

朝焼小焼だ	At sunrise, glorious sunrise
大漁だ	it's a big catch!
大羽鯛の大漁だ。	A big catch of sardines!
浜は祭りのようだけど	On the beach, it's like a festival
海の中では何万の	but in the sea, they will hold funerals
鯛のとむらいするだろう。	for the tens of thousands dead.

I teach a Big History course at J.F. Oberlin University and make it a rule to read this poem after I finish the lectures on the eight thresholds and the Anthropocene. Then students easily recognize that the theme of the poem is as Big History tells us – respect for all existence and a need to avoid anthropocentrism. Mainstream Big History also has respect for all life in its key concept of *emergence*, as well as in complexity. Every entity and being has emerged in the universe in the cosmic historical process. The problem is that it tends to rank these beings by the criteria of complexity.

Philosopher Ken Wilber criticizes the egalitarian viewpoint of eco-philosophers as 'flatland' in his book, *A Brief History of Everything* (2007). He says that if a being is more complicated, it has greater 'depth' and less 'span.' There is a 'holarchy of value' in which every being has intrinsic value, but these values are in gradation. He argues:

Many ecophilosophers agree with those statements, but they can't say why, because they have a hierarchy that denies hierarchy – they have only the flatland web of life and bioequality, which is not only self-contradictory, it paralyzes pragmatic action and cripples intrinsic values.³⁵

However, from the viewpoint of weakening-compensation, such an anthropocentric, complexity-oriented approach blinds us to the fact that we are weak and connected with everything. Depth is weakness. The gradation of depth is the gradation of weakness. Asian Big History finds in itself not only respect for others but also self-affirmation. While modern and Western self-awakening is derived from Descartes' axiom, 'I think, therefore I am,' in contrast, Asian self-awakening is between the macrocosm and microcosm, such as the Chinese 天人合一 or Hindu 梵我一如 (corresponding to Brahman and Atman). The self-awakening stems from awakening of the understanding: 'I am weak.'

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to describe the vision of Asian Big History based on Wang Dongyue's weakening compensation theory. My vision of Asian Big History is relation-oriented, altermodern, and non-anthropocentric.

Perhaps mainstream big-historians will ask me: 'Do you run the risk of dissolving Big History into different regional forms?' I admit that Big History is and should be humankind's common story and that mainstream Big History is a great achievement. However, mainstream Big History is captivated by modernism. So, we have to get out of it and look at it from outside – a new perspective. There are various ways to do so, and, for me, the way is Wang's Asian approach for Big History and my own vision of Buddhist Big History. As of now, I have no intention to propose that

it is 'the' alternative to mainstream Big History. Asian Big History may be the *yin* [陰], which has a complementary relationship with *yang* [陽], as physicist / ecologist Fritjof Capra argued in *The Tao of Physics* (1982).³⁶ I would like to emphasize that I do not want to return to Asia but want to go to cosmic space and get a truly cosmic perspective. The only thing I know at present is that mainstream Big History itself needs a viewpoint from outside. Go out of it, and we will get a broader perspective of Big History.

References

- Capra, Fritjof; *The Tao of Physics: An Explanation of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, London: Flamingo, 1982.
- Chaisson, Eric; *Cosmic Evolution: The Rise of Complexity in Nature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Christian, David; *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything*, London: Penguin, 2018.
- Christian, David; Cynthia Stokes Brown and Craig Benjamin, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014.
- Elhacham, Emily; Liad Ben-Uri, Jonathan Grozovski, Yinon Bar-On and Ron Milo, 'Global Human-Made Mass Exceeds all Living Biomass,' *Nature* 588 (7838) December 2020: 442–444.
- Georgescu-Roegen, Nicholas; *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Ginsburg, Simona; and Eva Jablonka, *The Evolution of the Sensitive Soul*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019.
- Harari, Yuval; *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Penguin, 2015.
- Kaneko, Misuzu; *Are You an Echo?: The Lost Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko*, trans. Sally Ito, David Jacobson and Michiko Tsuboi, Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2016.
- Kauffman, Stuart; *A Place in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Rodrigue, Barry; in 'Introduction: From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations, Introduction to Big History,' pp. 1–16, *From the Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, Vol. I, *Our Place in the Universe: An Introduction to Big History*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev, Delhi: Primus Books, 2015: 10.
- Rodrigue, Barry; 'Big History – A Study of All Existence Part 1: A World Connected,' *Journal of Big History* 5 (1) April 2022: 1–47.
- Spier, Fred; *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.
- Tronto, Joan; *Who Cares?: How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Tsujimura, Nobuo; and Hirofumi Katayama (2017) 'Think Cosmically, Act Globally: Emerging Clues for the Big History Movement,' *Big History and Universal Consciousness*, ed. Barry Rodrigue, Special edition of the *International Journal for the Transformation of Consciousness* 3 (1) June 2017: 45–71.
- Waal, Frans de; *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, London: Sourvenir Press, 2019.
- Wang, Dongyue; *A Unified Theory of Evolution*, trans. by Bridgemind, <www.BridgeMinds.net>, 2020.
- Wang Dongyue; *A Unified Theory of Evolution: Unified Philosophical Principles among Natural Being, Mental Being, and Social Being*, Beijing: CITIC Press, 2015 / 王东岳; 物演通论: 自然存在、精神存在与社会存在的统一哲学原理, 北京: 中信出版社, 2015.
- Wilber, Ken; *A Brief History of Everything, 20th Anniversary Edition*, Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017.

Endnotes

1. Wang Dongyue is an independent scholar. He was a medical student and acquired a master's degree in medical science, but he left the healthcare field shortly after he graduated. For a period, he worked as a guest professor of philosophy in the Northwest University in Shaanxi and also as a guest professor of Eastern Culture in the Communication University of Xi-An, Shaanxi, China. Wang 2020: v.

2. This point is argued also by Tsujimura and Katayama 2017.

3. The capital letters were in the original. Kauffman 1995: 10.

4. In his *The Entropy Law and Economic Process*, Georgescu-Roegen stresses the importance of the irrevocability of the entropic process and argues: 'It concerns one of man's weaknesses, namely, our reluctance to recognize our limitations in relation to space, to time, and to matter and energy. It is because of this weakness that ... the idea that we may defeat the Entropy Law by bootlegging low entropy with the aid of some ingenious device has its periodical fits of fashion.' Georgescu-Roegen 1971: 6.

5. Chaisson 2001: 132–136.

6. Christian 2018: 48.

7. Wang's book was first published in 1995, and, in 2015, the fourth edition came out.

8. Wang 2020: 26.

9. Wang 2020: 62.

10. Wang 2020: 17–18.

11. Wang 2020: 22–24

12. Wang 2020: 348–349.

13. Wang 2020: 62.

14. Wang 2020: 47.

15. Usage of the term 'understanding' is different from that of Western philosophical tradition. Wang explains the term at the glossary of the book: it specifically refers to the acute response of judgment emerging in animals of the vertebrate stage, that is, the complex identifying functions exhibited by the lower central nervous systems that begin to develop since notochord animals. It is the source and foundation upon which humans established their categorized identifying response. Since past philosophers failed to grasp where it comes from, they viewed it unique to humankind and confused it with the categorical classification

of predicates in elemental judgement of reason, or even arranged it to represent the totality of human perceptual capabilities (as Kant did). So, I cannot help but follow the old usage at some points in my book, but the reader should rigorously distinguish them when it comes across" (Wang 2020:526-527). In general, mainstream Big History tends to stress discontinuity between thresholds, whereas Wang pays attention to continuity. In the present various disciplines, especially neurobiology, are also more concerned about the continuity of mental phenomena among humans and animals. For example, see Ginsburg and Jablonka (2019).

16. Wang 2020: 154.

17. Wang 2020: 239–242.

18. Wang 2020: 378.

19. Wang 2020: 511.

20. Wang 2020: 55.

21. Christian 2018: 47–48.

22. Rodrigue and others 2015: 10.

23. Rodrigue 2022: 29. He also argues on the point: 'In other words, building on what mainstream big historians already know - complexity is dangerously fragile. So, in our understanding of the present and in planning for the future, we need to strongly engage with understanding the fragility of our complex existence. While we plan, we must logically simplify and allow for variety ... in order for all lifeforms to have a better chance of survival together.' Barry Rodrigue, e-mail to Hirofumi Katayama, 27 August 2022.

24. Tronto 2015: 3.

25. These are the *four phases of care* that Tronto describes. Tronto 2015: 5–6.

26. Waal 2009: 21.

27. Kauffman 1995: 5.

28. Elhacham and others 2020: 442.

29. Christian 2018: 282.

30. In the field of environmental economics, this approach is called *ecological modernization*.

31. Harari 2015: 462.

32. Wang 2020: 226, 250, 259.

33. The Buddhist text, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* [如来藏經] first explained that every living thing [sattva / 衆生/] has buddha-essence [tathāgatagarbha / 如来藏/], while the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* [涅槃經] provided the concept of Buddhahood [仏性 / Buddha-dhātu] and explained that '一切衆生悉有仏性' [every living thing has Buddhahood]. The *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* [

宝性論] completed the theory of Buddhahood, arguing that the purpose of preaching Buddhahood is to correct five mistakes: self-humiliation, contempt for other inferior living thing, obsession with delusion, slander of the Law, and self-centeredness. Buddhahood also confers on us five merits: self-affirmation, respect for others, wisdom [般若 / *prajñā*], knowledge [*jñāna*], and compassion for self and others.

34. This translation is in Kaneko (2016).

35. Wilber 2017: 31.

36. Capra 1982: 339–340.