

IBHA

MEMBERS NEWSLETTER

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The “Annoying” Big History in China

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Why is big history “annoying” in China? It is not exactly annoying in or by itself; it is annoying because of its frustrating reception in the country. When you see and hear your fellow historians, smilingly and expert-like, claiming that big history is not exactly history: it is cosmological history, which is beyond them; but not history, which is and should be confined to stories of humanity on earth, you could not but feel a strong annoyance that comes with it. When you are telling people about the value of integrating natural and human histories, as is the acknowledged aim of big historians, there would always be others insisting that big history, despite its overt ambition, has failed to realize this, and that, following their logic, what has not been achieved is totally unachievable. When you try to persuade them to start big history teaching there, i.e., if research in big history is seemingly difficult for many at the present stage, they would dodge and equivocate, and keep you waiting in quiet desperation and hopelessness for months on end. That’s the most annoying experience that I’ve had concerning big history, especially during the past one year and a half.

I say this not without a heavy heart. That was why, at the AAWH conference this past April, I spoke on “why big history is neglected in China,” trying to sort out the reasons for this state of affairs. And I discovered that despite of the few – three or four – papers currently available aiming at introducing big history to China, most people do not yet know what big history is; and when you mention Dalishi [Chinese translation of big history], they would immediately think of the macro history of Ray Huang’s, the late Chinese American historian, or the Marxian or the Wallersteinian stuff. And even among those few who do read in big history, they would still regard it, at least the current version of big history, as leaving natural and human histories un-united yet. Besides, there is the leaden institutional

In this issue of the IBHA Members’ Newsletter, we feature Professor **Sun Yue** of the Global History Center at Capital Normal University in Beijing, China (pp 1 - 3).

Melanie During, who studies Big History at the University of Amsterdam, offers her story of Big History - as well as exciting news resulting from the inaugural IBHA conference last August (pp 4 - 6).

First Students’ Big History research Conference, June 13-15, 2013, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands (p 7)

setup, treating even Chinese and foreign histories (in the name of world history) to different departments, allowing no room for big historians!

At the Grand Rapids IBHA conference this past August, I, as the only Chinese coming from a mainland institution, tried to anticipate the “prospects of big history in China.” And I discovered, surprisingly, that despite of professional historians’ antipathy toward big history, a fair number of non-historians, i.e., geologists, environmental scientists, anthropologists, etc., have shown an intuitive interest in big history. To be sure, they do not call it big history in most cases, but their approaches are almost identical to that of big history, trying as it does to unite natural and human histories.

And when I tried to go deeper for reasons behind this, I came to discover that as early as during the 1990s, the time David Christian was initiating his version of big history at Macquarie, a Chinese historian was already publishing on what he calls the Chinese “big history” traditions. Taking clues from this, I wrote a paper titled “The Tao of ‘Big History’ in China:

Chinese Traditions” for Barry Rodrigue, et al., (eds.) *From Big Bang to Global Civilization: A Big History Anthology*, which is coming out in 2013. The gist of it is the “unity of Heaven and humanity” tradition as started by Sima Qian and inherited by generations of Chinese historians until it was disrupted by the shock of China’s failure in front of the encroaching West; but then not long after, there arose a faint notion of “big history” in the Marxist approach, which has long been adopted as orthodox in China but which remains fairly undeveloped so far. This lasted until the coming embrace of big history by non-historians in China. Therefore, the Dao of big history in China is expected to pass on, regardless of the annoying myopia and indifference toward big history among its community of historians at the moment.

This is as much a hope as an expectation. First, ours is a globalized world, in the sense of ever tightening connectedness as a result of the sprawling and overlapping economies and the accelerating sci-tech developments that bring peoples from around the world ever closer together. Many issues arising out of this context can be resolved only by humanity as a whole with a transcending vision, e.g., shortages of energy resources and pollution, and China is



Leonid Grinin, Lea Seigny , Akop Nazaretyan, David Christian, Sun Yue

ignoring this global transcending vision at her peril, a vision which can be conveniently supplied by the big history approach. Secondly, big history, as pointed out by a host of big historians, sheds light on some of the perennially significant questions as self-identity and sustainable development, which have been lacking amidst the fragmentation of traditional curricula, lending it a strong appeal of integration and wholeness. Thirdly, big history allows historians to rethink history and the history profession itself, so as to make history once again relevant to our collective human welfare, not only lip services but also part of our concrete thinking and doing (actually these are the main ideas of a most recent essay that I've written and published in China's *Historiography Quarterly*, titled "Transcending Humanity to Discover Humanity? A Critique of Big History"). And fourthly, even in China, there are people who would accept the validity of big history, standing it alongside of W.H. McNeill's "civilization competition" and J.H. Bentley's "cross-cultural interaction" as the three or

four (if we include environmental history) important models for constructing global histories. That's why we are running a whole collection of papers for our 2013 volume of *Global History Review* (published annually by the Global History Center of Capital Normal University in collaboration with the China Social Sciences Press).

To be fair, it may take some time before big history comes to be fully embraced in China. Yet we have reasons to hope, or expect, that it won't be so annoying as it is today.

Sun Yue teaches at College of Foreign Languages and works at the Global History Center, Capital Normal University in Beijing. He researched early modern European witchcraft for his PhD dissertation, and is now working on utopian dreams, especially in connection with the Chinese notion of Datong (Great Harmony), in an effort to see better the orientations of humanity on earth.



Melanie During

University of Amsterdam

My name is Melanie During, I am a undergraduate student working on Big History at the University of Amsterdam. My educational background is the Earth Sciences bachelor at the University of Amsterdam. My bachelor covers the basic processes on Earth from atmosphere to core, and besides gaining knowledge of all these processes I have also developed skills in statistics, math, physics, chemistry, programming and GIS (map making). The fieldwork that came with my studies offered me the opportunity to see how all of these processes affected the Earth. I learned how the stage upon which we live is not as unchangeable as generally assumed and I became more and more intrigued. However, in my third year I had to pick a direction in which I had to specialize. This turned out to be harder than expected, since I realized they are all connected. I wanted to go for the impossible, palaeontology with its context. When pronouncing these ideas I was actually confronted with warnings, I was told I probably couldn't even do research in this and I should look for something with a future. Knowing not what to do I decided to go for the core of all processes: geology. I went into depth with planetesimals, mineralogy and various mantle processes. These were all truly fascinating, but mostly because I still kept connecting them with all the other processes on Earth's surface. When this Geology semester was over I was asked to do a thesis in Ultra High Pressure metamorphics. Studying the complexity of plate tectonics and the formation of diamond and garnet in various regions in Europe was very interesting, but also very specific. I felt caged by this definite specialization and the lack of purpose. I did not see myself specialize in a handful of geological processes for the rest of my life. I thereby decided to drop my thesis and extend my studies with one more year. A friend of mine from my studies told me about Big History one day, asking if I might be interested in using my time for that. She told me it covered the grand narrative from the Big Bang up to today, to which I replied: "But I know all of that!" Nonetheless I took the course and fell in love with it instantly. Currently I am working on my thesis on how geology affects evolution with Fred Spier as my supervisor and I will graduate for my bachelor in June 2013.

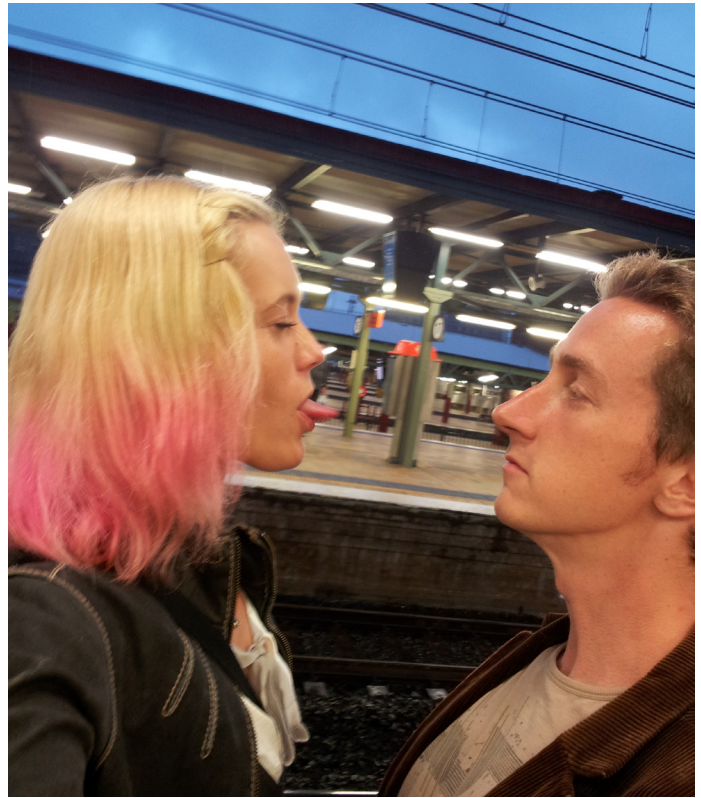


Melanie During

Big History allowed me to both specialize and keep the big picture in mind at the same time. For the first time ever -I dare say- I was following a course I really loved and I really wanted to do more for than was required. My book for the course (Big History and The Future of Humanity by Fred Spier) had come in early and by the time the course started I was reading it for the second time. At the end of each lecture I swamped Fred Spier and Esther Quaedackers with questions and after the second or third lecture I was invited to join them and the guest lecturers for drinks. The conversations we had after each lecture covered various subjects and I felt highly privileged to be a part of them. Being able to talk to academics from so many different disciplines was highly enlightening and invoked not only a sense of awareness and understanding, it also increased my urge to understand it all. Halfway through the course students were allowed to turn in the first half of their 'Little Big History'. I had written mine on the subject of geology and soon after Fred and Esther asked me to speak at the IBHA conference in Michigan. I therefore took about 15 jobs, varying from cleaning to babysitting and anything I could come across, and I went.

At the inaugural conference I dare say I have never been surrounded by so many intelligent and driven people! I enjoyed listening to all these speeches from so many different disciplines. At first I felt highly insecure about being there as an undergrad but I was quickly put at ease by the interest people had in me. I had expected some form of patronizing prejudice as the academic world is far too capable of showing, instead I received a warm welcome and my thoughts appeared worth listening to. Besides making a lot of friends at the conference, I was even lucky enough to meet the love of my life, David Baker, and we are now engaged.

In my opinion the world needs Big History. When watching the news or even just hearing people talk in the streets it strikes me more and more how little they understand of the world and how much is substituted with various kinds of nonsense. In my opinion this opens up a niche for Big History, enlightening our societies with knowledge and understanding. I think



Two IBHA members Melanie During and David Baker, featured in last June's newsletter, got engaged in November

a lot of misery and misguidance could be taken away once people realize why and how everything came into being and what they could possibly contribute to it themselves.

I have been able to sample not only the Big History branch in Amsterdam, but also the branch in Sydney. In Amsterdam the course is covered by the Faculty of Exact Sciences and Math as an elective. Students from various disciplines take the course, the most common disciplines I have come across are social sciences, philosophy and political sciences (though out of 120 students there were only so many I could talk to). Esther and Fred are currently really trying to push for a Big History Institute in Amsterdam. In Sydney, Big History is covered in the History department, where I believe it even has its roots. The only reason it struck me a little, is the fact that I have crawled into it in a science department. I noticed how David Christian and also David Baker are currently trying very hard to get the second-year level course off the ground. It was very nice to see up close how two departments on two ends of



Melanie During with the femur of a Woolly Rhino, fished up in June in the Westerschelde (NL)

the world are working so hard to make Big History undeniable at the university level.

I have no idea in what way yet, but I would definitely like to be part of this intellectual movement. On the short term I am hoping to be able to do graduate research in Big History, though be it geology-based. Long term is more difficult to tell, for there are still too many uncertainties. I will say however, I have big

ambitions and am willing to work very hard and I will see where this will take me.

I see growing departments in Amsterdam and in Sydney, a growing community within the IBHA. Somehow I cannot help but be positive about the future. I am however cautious and will therefore not make too specific predictive statements. But I truly think Big History will get the attention and scientific acceptance it deserves and I hope I can do my part in contributing to the process of getting there.



Thanks to Melanie During for the banner at the top of this newsletter's first page.

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STUDENTS' BIG HISTORY RESEARCH CONFERENCE



FIRST STUDENTS' BIG HISTORY RESEARCH CONFERENCE

June 13-15, 2013, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This conference will bring together young big history researchers to exchange ideas and discuss the career possibilities that are currently available as well as those that the future might bring. Supervisors, other interested scholars and potential sponsors are more than welcome to come and support the future generation of big historians.

The conference will start on Thursday June 13. The morning sessions of June 14 and 15 are reserved for presentations, while the afternoon sessions will be devoted to discussions about two relevant themes: energy and big history research challenges. The conference will be concluded with a keynote speech by Fred Spier.

Attendance through Skype will be possible.

We invite you to submit an abstract of your paper before February 28 to Esther Quaedackers (E.Quaedackers@uva.nl). For more information, please don't hesitate to contact Esther Quaedackers or Melanie During (Melanie.During@student.uva.nl) or check our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/IBHASTudentsConference>).

We very much hope that you will join us for the first students' big history research conference to be held at the University of Amsterdam on June 13-15, 2013!

