

Big History as a Commodity at Chinese Universities: A Study in Circulation

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There is no way to date when histories first became interested in the history of commodities. From the start of history writing in antiquity, one can find some notice taken of what people purchased and consumed, and conditions under which they did so (Breisach 2007; Burrow 2008). The more social life is studied, the more information is collected about commodities in particular and in general. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is heartening to think that the history of commodities must no longer be folded into narratives that treat them only tangentially. The number of historical studies devoted to specific commodities, as well as the nature of general commodification, grows at a prodigious rate (Warman 2003; Abbot 2008; Riello and Parthasarathi 2011; Marton 2014; Bray et al. 2015, etc.). Certainly, no one can keep abreast of literature rapidly expanding in so many directions. However, we can and should step back and reflect on what this increase in knowledge means. This wider reflection, I believe, is also an educational issue. The more scholars know about the importance of commodification in historical development, the more urgent becomes the question of how

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to impart this history to students. And, from the converse angle, once we reflect on commodity history as an educational issue, it colours our historical understanding of commodity production and exchange (Brooks and Normore 2010). Thus, this pedagogical challenge, and its implications for economic history, is what this chapter is about. I will use examples from China and Chinese universities to make a case about the opportunities and pitfalls contained in asking students, especially those new to the study of economic history, to think about the history of commodities as a distinct and valuable intellectual realm.

Some words of context not only set the stage for this discussion, but also give some clue as to what is at stake in the effort as a whole. At the time of this writing, a momentous transformation is taking place in the nature of global education. This is an announcement by China's Ministry of Education that, as the *China Daily* headline on 8 April 2016 runs: 'One in Five of the World's College Students are in China'. To make sense of this, we must register the magnitude of this growth in student numbers in China. Indeed, from an—even for the times—insignificant figure of 117,000 at the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, reports for 2015 like that appearing in the *Asian Correspondent* on 8 April 2016 put the number at some 37 million. This means that in 1949, about one in 400 Chinese 18–22-year-olds attended institutions of higher education, while, by the close of the 2010s, the number will likely be one in two. If we look to the future in general, it is easy to find projections that the worldwide higher education student population will reach 262 million, with 'more than half in India and China alone' according to *University World News* on 19 February 2012. Whatever the exact number, the significance of these figures is their likely impact. This ever-growing cohort will undoubtedly be distributed around the globe, but how? What will happen to both China and the world when the (baseline figure) of one in five of the world's college students graduate and go on to make their way, particularly given the difficulties of providing these students with a thorough and rigorous education (Sheng 2016)?

These questions may sound too wide-ranging to link to the hard-headed analysis of the impact and significance of commodity exchange (Van der Spek et al. 2014). Yet, I argue that as we investigate market integration and the circulation of commodities, we should also pay attention to the consequences of the knowledge of global economic history on this rising cohort of Chinese students in particular and on the next

generation of students as a whole. After all, the ‘massification’ of Chinese universities is deeply linked to the development of the global economy and all its attendant commodification (Hayhoe et al. 2012). In other words, the processes that are creating integrated global markets are also driving the growth of higher education in places like China. Here we come to specifics: as economies integrate and educational institutions grow, the question of what students learn about world economic history rises to a level of critical importance. To a great extent, these are the decision-makers of the future. Their subsequent behaviour will be shaped by the information they absorb and the ideas they endorse about the creation and present-day nature of global economic integration. To that end, we should pay closer attention to what Chinese students are learning and what might strengthen their understanding as they grow to become active participants in the world’s next round of globalization.

I will further argue that the historiographical development called ‘big history’ offers a valuable opportunity to assess Chinese university students’ understanding of economic integration and global commodification. To make this case, I will argue that big history itself should be treated as a commodity that packages for intellectual consumption a story of global marketization, embedding it in a context that places economic activity within an account of nature and humanity’s engagement with it. This mode of grasping history is particularly useful for students in expanding educational systems like the Chinese. To understand why, we should consider a perceptive comment on how these students learn originally published in Chinese in 2004, but still valid over ten years later. The scholar Yang Dong Ping addressed the issue of the commodification of education and argued that, given the fact that ‘higher education and professional education beyond compulsory education offers a kind of quasi-public product’, current circumstances in China require a critical, yet open embrace of commodification in education. This process is not, as Yang puts it, ‘evil’ (2004: 55), but necessary for the establishment of a pedagogical system suited to twenty-first-century realities. As such, it should not be wholly directed by governmental institutions. Simultaneously, however, ‘The enormous market created by the shortage of educational resources in an obsolete system has brought about rent-seeking activities, deviant behavior and corruption in education’ (Yang 2004: 59). For this reason, the embrace of commodification cannot lose sight of the overarching goal of cultivating the student and ‘upholding the value of education’ (Yang 2004: 60). Thus, this rising cohort of

students will be educated in a world where they have a growing number of ways to place commodification in a global context. Some of these ways will be more responsible than others, and none of them guarantees the insights and mastery they need. However, the confluence of new syntheses of global and big history, along with expanding markets for it in places like Chinese universities, presents valuable opportunities for all involved. We should attend to the general situation.

The intervening years since Yang was writing in 2004 have sharpened the urgency of these concerns. In addition, the ongoing professionalization and globalization of higher education has heightened sensitivity to lapses in standards and has dampened the frequency of mismanagement and malfeasance. At the same time, the complexity of educational commodification has magnified significantly. Presently, Chinese universities, particularly central research institutions, host a wide and complicated array of public-private partnerships. Beyond this, and in some ways even more wide-ranging in its implications, Chinese students today are likely to be more than consumers of official, degree-granting education. A myriad array of educational services, combined with skill and career-enhancing opportunities at home and abroad (often at considerable expense) combines to overlay and honeycomb participation in official education with the consumption of supplementary and intensifying educational products. To the extent that personal experience sheds light on the matter, in working with Chinese students, I have found that a majority continue to purchase pedagogical commodities beyond tuition and expenses for a degree. Those who do not are likely motivated by a lack of financial resources as much as absence of interest. More empirical research will document patterns and trends, but the undoubted growth in China's higher education system continues to be intertwined with an intensification of educational market activity and commodification.

This leads to the main point. The ways in which Chinese graduates understand the global spread of marketization and commodification makes a difference. Commonplace sentiments about students representing the future need to be specified in relation to the knowledge that this rising generation has. From the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge (Collins 1998), it becomes more plausible to maintain that ideas do not merely circulate. Specifically, ideas about markets and commodities are bound up with the allegiances held by this growing cohort, along with the conflicts these allegiances engender. Hence, I will make a case as to how and why big history can be presented to Chinese students as

a commodity that explains commodification. In doing this, I argue that instruction in big history can be tailored to address meaningful concerns about the creation and nature of global markets. In the conclusion, I will suggest paths for future collaborative work between scholars concerned with economic history and contemporary market integration, and pedagogical specialists seeking more effective ways to ensure the validity and relevance of the higher education given to Chinese students and their counterparts. I will start with the question of what a field with an expansive name like ‘big history’ has to offer a very big cohort of students facing an uncertain future.

1 CONSUMING COMMODIFICATION

In the simplest sense, ‘commodification’ refers to the emergence of new goods and services to purchase, and in practice is linked to processes of ‘monetization’, a term that not only connotes the fixing of a currency value to a commodity, but also the creation of economic networks whereby the value of commodities can be apprehended and calculated abstractly. From a teaching standpoint, the question is what basic knowledge do students need of commodification and monetization? And once they acquire this basic knowledge, how can advanced students continue to obtain the mastery they need? Before answering these questions, it is necessary to grasp that they are not only academic one, for experiences of the commodification and monetization of regional and national economies are not new phenomena in China, and opportunities for the public to learn more about the nature of these economic transformations are available and intelligible to a wider public. For instance, southwest of the provincial capital of Taiyuan lies the sleepy (by Chinese standards) town of Pingyao, itself in the relatively less developed province of Shanxi. Yet, throughout the year, masses of tourists, mostly Chinese, visit Pingyao in order to see something that is not easy to find in twenty-first-century China, namely a well-preserved town conveying the atmosphere of the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the period of China’s last experience of imperial rule. The crowds wandering the streets are likely not thinking of economic rationalization and commodity networks, but Shanxi has a widespread reputation for producing clever merchants, and the bulk of sites open to tourists are, in fact, the physical remains of trade networks and a Qing version of counting houses (Wilson and Yang 2016). This is clearly visible in what the city’s tourist board lists as a central attraction:

the headquarters and attendant social institutions of the *rishengcheng* banking and commercial exchange network. These were clan-run enterprises which served to move both goods and treasure at a time when imperial China had difficulty sustaining standardized currency, communication and distribution systems (Yang 1952). In short, in front of tens of thousands of people is a lesson on a commodification and distribution system from the early modern era to the nineteenth century that might, under other circumstances, have developed into the dominant one in China and regionally. Why it developed the way it did—as well as the way it did not—is a valuable story, one that if transformed into a more rigorous and analytical narrative could helpfully be disseminated to the rising generation of students. Indeed, this is the kind of exercise students need in order to grasp the larger picture. And the story of Pingyao is one of many. Other examples could be found in the history of China's adoption of silver coinage or in the dramatic rise and fall of Qing dynasty financiers like Hu Xueyuan.

Thus, the point is not to elevate a single site or episode above all other matters of relevance and interest; it is to emphasize that one does not need to begin with abstract and unfamiliar matters to focus attention on the origin, extent and dissolution of economic networks and commodity chains. Visible reminders are all around students, and comparisons between Chinese and international histories are easily broached for discussion. For instance, once students are asked to consider the history of river guilds along the Grand Canal, they could also be asked to compare them to syndicates and merchants' leagues in other parts of the world. These efforts are needed, for while there is indeed some specialization in global economic history at Chinese universities, along with some understanding of the subject that has percolated into general academic consciousness, there is, as yet, little agreement or even much collective discussion on what basic knowledge students ought to obtain, and how an engagement with East Asian economic and social history fits into their education as a whole. To be sure, a discussion might not yield a consensus or even a shared pedagogical plan. But it will crystalize what is at stake in reaching out to this cohort of students. This is where big history meets an emerging need.

Why? For what reason do we need a vast, new field like big history rather than something more circumscribed? To take up this question, it is best to define the term 'big history' itself. Consider one effective summing up:

Big History is a young, transdisciplinary field, in which scholars from diverse academic disciplines seek to make sense of the story told by the entirety of human knowledge. Big History bends what is considered ‘history’ back to the beginning of the universe. It begins with cosmology and physics and moves on through astronomy, chemistry, geology, paleontology, evolutionary biology, archaeology, and anthropology. Ultimately, it recontextualizes traditional ‘recorded’ human history as inseparable from natural history, environmental geography, and the story of the cosmos. And it is bound together with the art of storytelling that is the province of the humanities. (Simon 2015: 11–12)

Except for the now, slightly strained ‘young’, Richard B. Simon’s definition combines the two parts that should form the warp and woof of every functioning definition of big history: first, an integration of what is called ‘history’ within the larger story of ‘natural history’, stretching into an account of the universe as a whole; and, second, an effort to narrate both sides of the story in a way that lends it substance and meaning.

Obvious objections arise in relation to the ambition of pursuing big history. On the one hand, the task seems impossibly large. It is daunting enough to practise global history, let alone a global history that incorporates an incomparably larger history of the planet and the cosmos. On the other hand, the question of discovering an underlying meaning to history is fraught with peril even when the scope of the subject studied is a single village in a circumscribed period. How can the expansion of subject matter to great proportions make the challenge any easier? Yet, the point of referring to big history in this context is not to find a single meaning to history, but to address a specific need in the education of these students, namely an apprehension of how (and what kind) of global nexuses of exchange come into being and why they do so. This task is inseparable from the corollary question of why other nexuses fall apart or never come to be. Big history can aptly help us do that and we should keep in mind that it is not an artifice forced upon the data; rather, it stems from a recognition that current disciplinary knowledge areas flow into each other, and that traditional intellectual boundaries, if not reflected upon, impede the pursuit of understanding.

To provide one example of a place where considerations of the origins of our contemporary global economy also evoke a need for the wider context of big history, consider this passage from William J. Bernstein’s *A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World*. Bernstein noted that the Western-led global nexus established in c. 1500 came in the wake of

vast epidemics that laid low expansive empires and economic networks in eastern and western Asia. After quoting the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun on plague obliterating whole cities, Bernstein writes:

In the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the furies reached out and with a perverse will savaged the planet's long-distance trading apparatus, and along with it the most advanced commercial societies: the great Muslim civilizations of the Middle East and the entrepôts of India and China that so dazzled Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta. Europe too had been devastated, but within a few centuries its survivors, wielding a fearsome combination of religiously inspired brutality and quantitative genius, would wade into the wreckage and establish the modern Western domination of trade. (Bernstein 2008: 151)

It is hard to agree unreservedly that microbes set upon a trade network with a 'perverse will', but Bernstein is right to draw attention to the link between 'plagues and people' and a world economy. And this turn requires some knowledge of how civilization clusters formed in different geographical regions, with their ecological and technological adaptations and value systems (McNeill and McNeill 2003). This, for its part, requires some sense of human origins, which blends into the larger story of evolution and so forth. In short, an idea of big history is already implicit in the study of trade links and commodification.

It may be protested that these wider chains of connections are already part of existing sciences. This is true in the sense that big history does not present itself as an antagonist to existing knowledge. However, the point of such analyses is not to invent something that rejects existing scholarship or cultivate quarrels with individual authors. Instead, it is to ask observers to reflect on the connections that are, in fact, before them. This returns us to the crowds of visitors at Pingyao, and the future of the students who gain some cognizance of China's financial history. The connections between what was once China's economy and what it became are literally before the eyes of those who walk its streets. Likewise, the thought of what might have happened to the global trade network had the history of China taken another path accompanies all reflection on China's economic history. Yet, we still must know how to take disparate and often inchoate recognition and weld it together so that it is grasped by those on their way to becoming the world's majority student cohort. To go forward, it is necessary to shift perspective back

to the viewpoint of a student and to look more closely at how those at Chinese universities experience the intellectual challenge of making meaning out of the data before them.

2 STUDENT RESPONSE

In the spring of 2016, collaborating with local colleagues, I surveyed students about their knowledge of world commodity history at two Chinese universities: the Beijing Technology and Business University (北京工商大学) and the RenMin University of China (中国人民大学). Each institution attracts students interested in international business and seeks to offer a globally competitive education. The Beijing Technology and Business University currently has about 20,000 full-time and part-time attendees in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. As befits its name, the school attracts the career-minded, and undergraduates are required to take a course in ‘business essentials’. Students in this class of forty were surveyed about their knowledge of global economic and commodity history, as well as their opinions as to why it would (or would not) be worth their while to know about the subject. While single surveys produce inconclusive data, they do generate evocative material, especially in areas that are little investigated.

From this perspective, one result of the survey is particularly noteworthy, even by relaxed standards: students were not able to give details about the history of individual commodities. This included traditional products like silk—whose history and development is commonly found in Chinese school curricula, as well as products like PCs, as students often mentioned names like Steve Jobs without providing any concrete detail of his accomplishments. Beyond this, although students generally acknowledged the value of studying this subject, the reasons they supplied were themselves highly abstract, and they did not show much evidence of having been exposed to commodity history. To illustrate by example, one of the best and most-informed answers was provided by a student who chose to express herself in English:

All I know about individual commodities are three people. The first is Zheng Ho, who sailed to the Western world in the Ming Dynasty. He brought gunpowder to other countries. The second person is Xuan Zang, who was famous of the Silk Roads. He brought silk, silkworm tea to Europe. This is why British people drink afternoon tea. The last one is

the Italian sailor Columbus. He found the new world and brought Indian spice back to Italy. (Response I, March 2016)

Factually, there is something wrong about everything the student wrote. Columbus returned to Spain, Xuan Zang went to India, and the Byzantines had knowledge of Chinese sericulture over a hundred years before he travelled. Likewise, Zheng Ho sailed west of China, but never left the Indian Ocean, and in any event, knowledge of gunpowder was diffused by the Mongols along the Silk Road, and was used in the Mediterranean and Europe at least a century before he sailed. Yet, the point is not to ridicule an answer that, in its own way, demonstrated an awareness of the underlying issues at stake. Thus, the story of gunpowder indeed encompasses the important movement of technology and goods from China, as well as back to it. Likewise, while the process whereby the British became a nation of tea drinkers did not depend on a Tang dynasty monk, the student was right to intuit a global nexus of exploration, trade and (presumably) conflict. In fact, this answer suggests an implicit desire to grasp the underlying links in the development of the world economy more thoroughly.

This is where big history can help the current cohort in their understanding of global economies and networks of exchange. RenMin University has some 12,000 students and specializes in the social sciences, attracting students who seek careers in upper-level management and knowledge industries. Unlike the college students surveyed earlier, graduate students at RenMin often have some idea of big history, and more readily agree that the history of commodities must be woven into it. However, they agree that the large questions require much study to answer. For instance, one student wrote:

I have learnt about some history of porcelains in another course. I think maybe as a traditional way, we learn the history of porcelain to know how it affected the economy, politics or something else of one or more countries. But from the angle of big history, I think there can be more things to research, such as how ancient people found the way to product porcelains, why porcelains are invented by the specific people, and as we have produced a lot of porcelains, how the castoff porcelains will affect the environment. All in all, studying the history of commodities can help us to learn how did those who lived in different places know and use some kinds of resources and whether the trade influence the usage of resources in the perspective of all humankind. (Response II, March 2016)

Yet, what most differentiates this student from others less versed in the subject is not the account of porcelain. Some awareness of traditional products and goods is common in this cohort. Rather, what stands out

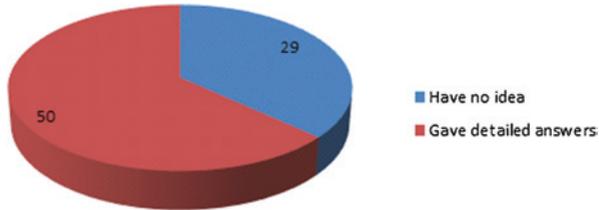


Fig. 1 Student responses to the question: ‘What qualities do nations need to engage successfully in international trade?’ *Source* Author’s survey at Beijing Technology and Business University (2016)

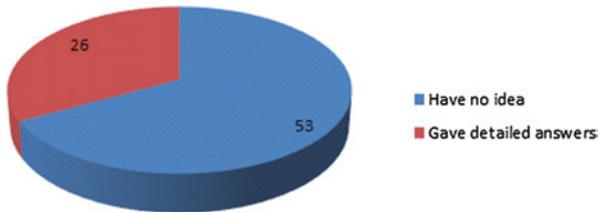


Fig. 2 Student responses to the question: ‘Do you know the history of any individual commodities? How did you learn about it?’ *Source* Author’s survey at Beijing Technology and Business University (2016)

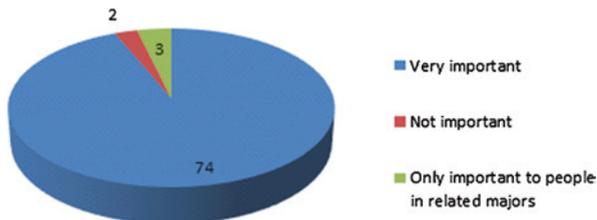


Fig. 3 Student responses to the question: ‘How important is it to know world economic history and why?’ *Source* Author’s survey at Beijing Technology and Business University (2016)

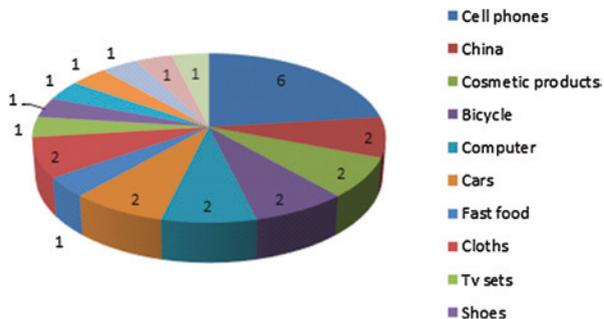


Fig. 4 Students' responses to the question 'Do you have specific knowledge of the history of any commodity?' *Source* Author's survey at Beijing Technology and Business University (2016)

is the awareness of benefits of raising questions about the commodity's larger context. The majority of students do not have this. A glance at the four pie charts for the students from Beijing Technology and Business University makes evident that they do not have the detailed information required to answer questions about the global economic system that they themselves acknowledge as essential (Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4).

To be sure, these seventy-five or so students are only a small number of the total, and more systematic studies would be revealing. Still, in the process of soliciting student views, I found little to suggest that their sensibilities are atypical. Until now, big history is not a commonly taught subject at Chinese universities. Nevertheless, I believe that it is currently the best pedagogical commodity available to them to better grasp the connecting links in understanding the emergence of a global economy and transnational civilizations. To spell out why this is so, we must go into more detail about what distinguishes big history from the more commonly taught global history.

3 FROM GLOBAL TO BIG

In pedagogical terms, the question is what kind of global historical consciousness a student will obtain. At present, Chinese students are commonly exposed to a version of global transformation that ascribes great importance to market forces. Such curricula typically aim to inculcate awareness of the role Marx and Engels ascribed to the bourgeois. Leaving

aside political differences and polemical conflicts, there are aspects of this historical understanding that also lead to an appreciation of big history. Thus, passages like this one from *The Communist Manifesto* provide some notion of the kind of impact ascribed to marketization:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Marx 1848)

Despite the unresolved ideological questions of how to define the bourgeois, this notion of battering down Chinese walls is a helpful reminder that commodification is inseparable from a wider story of human disequilibrium. And this story is put into full focus with an account of humanity's place in nature. Consider the larger significance of this comment from the science journalist and historian Charles C. Mann:

It is strange, too, to realize that globalization has been enriching the world for nigh on five centuries. And it is unsettling to think of globalization's equally long record of ecological convulsion, and the suffering and political mayhem caused by that convulsion. But there is grandeur, too, in this view of our past; it reminds us that every place has played a part in the human story, and that all are embedded in the larger, inconceivably complex progress of life on this planet. (Mann 2011: xxviii)

This conscious evocation of Darwin's 'there is grandeur in this view of life' is designed to alert readers to the fact that he is quite aware of the widest consequences of this 'beating down of walls' and that he wishes all aspects of it be seen with open eyes. This requires a broader view towards life on the planet as a whole, one focusing on ecology in its broadest sense. Simultaneously, it requires a more detailed picture of the everyday movement of life, which in practice means an appreciation of global economic history. Otherwise, passed-on sentiments about globalization and the bourgeois creating a 'world after its own image' remain abstractions, and student knowledge will concomitantly remain

abstract and haphazard. Here is the challenge for educators and why the relatively smaller topics of marketization and commodification are best placed in the wider context of big history. We must ask ourselves what can be done to anchor student knowledge of the complexity of life on the planet within an accurate perception of the place of exchange—particularly commodity exchange—in creating our current form of inter-linked globalization.

To answer this question, we must examine the ways in which big history developed in the past, going on to consider the directions it might take in the future. According to Cynthia Stokes-Brown in her essay ‘A Little History of Big History’, although the 1970s saw renewed efforts by scientists to popularize knowledge of the larger story of the cosmos, it was only the 1990s that saw the crystallization of big history as both a coherent intellectual programme and a discrete offering in the university curriculum (Stokes-Brown 2015: 301–303). As she tells it, there was a close connection between intellectual aspiration and pedagogical need. Students were arriving at universities with a need to establish a mental framework or explanatory paradigm that would allow them to make sense of the wide range of information they were being asked to learn, as well as to find a scientifically responsible sense of meaning within this (for them) new and potentially exciting world of information. Simultaneously, within academia, emerging with some poignancy within the historical profession, hyperspecialization was provoking its own counter-reaction. An older, and often derided, historiographical tradition of telling the largest possible story of humanity’s place in the universe returned and began to challenge the widespread view that these vast narratives are too speculative and unrigorous to belong in the scholarly mainstream.

A central figure in this transformation is David Christian (b. 1946). A British-American historian of Russia, while teaching at Macquarie University in Australia in the 1980s, he began offering an introductory course that explicitly sought to place the human experience of the last three to five-thousand years within the much larger contexts of the development of terrestrial life and the cosmos itself. Out of this course, he produced in 2005 the fully-elaborated study *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, the book that most anchored big history’s wider reputation in a wider reading public. For our purposes, what is most important is that Christian not only practised big history, but also put forward theoretical pieces explaining the underlying purposes in the project. Most helpful are his ‘The Case for Big History’ (Christian 1991)

and ‘The Return of Universal History’ (Christian 2011). These essays together enable us to summarize what big history can offer Chinese students about the place of marketization and commodification within a global context.

The foundation of Christian’s case is that while big history is difficult in practice, advances in all historically-minded scholarship—biology and geology, for instance—as much as history itself allow different scales of time to be linked together in an overarching narrative of increasing thresholds of complexity. This includes advances in the popularization of technical fields to non-specialists. Once it is grasped that these scholarly tools are available, larger questions can be asked and answered in sufficient detail to shape our understanding of history’s meaning. What relationship does this have with the main question of the meaning of economic activity and commodity exchange? Christian provides an illuminating answer. Responding to a view of human nature widely associated with Adam Smith that human beings have a natural tendency to ‘truck and barter’, he responds that such a view of ‘economic man’ does not take into account the much longer pre-history of humanity’s time as hunter-gatherers, for:

There is nothing ‘natural’ about the state, or civilization, or economic growth. The entire history of agrarian and now industrial civilizations is from this point of view a curious and rather surprising coda tacked onto the end of human history. (Christian 1991: 10)

Putting the matter this way enables Christian to raise the most telling pedagogical questions of his own:

Should we admire the explosive growth of the past few millennia? Is it, perhaps, what distinguishes us from other living species? Or can we identify similar turning points in the history of other living species? Is human history governed, ultimately, by the rhythms of natural history as a whole? What is the likely impact of our own history on the history of the planet as a whole? Is the rapid growth of human society proof of a fertility in invention so astonishing (and so untypical of animal species as a whole) that it will continually outstrip the dangers it creates? (Christian 1991: 10)

These questions are not rhetorical; rather, they are challenges that arise from the ongoing integration of big history into our intellectual awareness. Writing almost two decades later, after the idea of big history

gained wider acceptance, an even more forthright Christian specified the change in thinking he sought:

I predict that in fifty years' time, all historians will understand that it is possible and fruitful to explore the past on multiple scales, many extending far beyond Braudel's *longue durée*, by reaching back to the origins of our species, the origins of the earth, and even the origins of the cosmos. The new universal history will transcend existing disciplinary boundaries, exploiting the powerful intellectual synergies available to those willing to deploy the methods and insights of multiple disciplines. (Christian 2011: 7)

The transformation ensures that 'history rediscovers an interest in deep, even law-like patterns of change' as opposed to breaking into 'many isolated islands of knowledge'. In the end, Christian envisions a change in sensibilities, even if most historians stick to their specialties, since 'the context of historical research will be transformed. Seeing human history as part of a much larger story will affect how historians think about research, the questions they ask, the ways they collaborate, and the way they judge the significance of scholarship'. In particular: 'At large scales, the pixels of human action generate clear patterns, and awareness of these patterns will inevitably change how we think about history at smaller scales' (Christian 2011: 21).

Another way to put this is that the smaller questions we ask about the history of commodity exchange will acquire more meaning when we recognize fully both the vast difference (and some underlying continuities) between a world of economic exchange and the 'pre-historic' and natural worlds that came before it. This also has significant pedagogical implications, particularly in giving students a sense of overarching human concern throughout the various subjects of their studies. Here is what is at stake in students' accounts of commodification: it is helping them grasp that learning more about the history of commodification can help them to understand the important debate about universal history as a whole. This challenge returns us to the world of Chinese students and their global counterparts.

4 CONCLUSION: TYING THE THREADS TOGETHER

A central thrust of the argument presented here is that big history be presented to the current cohort of university students as a commodity that helps them to make sense of their own world of commodities and

to interpret it within the wider world of nature. Such a product could take the form of elective courses offered to a broad range of students, as well as study aides and popularizations that provide intellectual and narrative coherence to the complex of themes that big history treats. That some courses in big history are beginning to be offered and some of the literature treating big history is spreading in China only underscore the need to make the case for it more energetically and directly. This is a pedagogical project that can invigorate student comprehension of, and participation in, some of the most vital debates of the day about the intersection of humanity's economies, resources, and dreams and aspirations. Moreover, that students in China are not the only ones who would gain from this immersion follows from the argument. Chinese students currently represent an enormous percentage of the number of the world's students overall, and their needs reveal much about the needs and circumstances of world students altogether.

Yet, the conclusion should not stop with students and their situation. Engaging this topic is not a deviation for scholars working in the field of global commodity exchange, both past and present. Specialists in commodity sub-fields would profit from asking how their own sphere of activity could be presented to the students consuming big history. The questions of overall meaning that are inherent in such a large perspective would come to the fore in a salutary way and David Christian's call for a return to a universal history could be channelled into needed debates about what he called the 'pixels' of meaning in this cosmic story. In short, though this essay may have begun with the flow of Chinese students into the world's higher education system, its current of thought circles back into the scholarly mainstream. These are the people who, if given the full opportunity to do so, will consume the narratives of meaning provided by their teachers and guides. It can only help to address them directly, and presenting them with a version of big history that addresses fundamental economic questions is an effective and compelling means to do so.

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