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Two Modes of Cyclicity in the Ancient World

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Abstract

The cyclical view of time and history appears in two modes represented respectively by the Indo-Hellenic and the Chinese tradition. The former contains a conception of *Mahayuga* or Great Year, which signifies the periodic destruction and reconstruction in the cosmos and human world. In addition, it analogizes human affairs to the celestial cycle and therefore generalizes the mode of cyclical movements in both the cosmos and the human world as “uniform rotation.” In contrast, the Chinese tradition incorporates Heaven and human into a unity, containing no conception of periodic interruption in the movement of Heaven-human unity. At the same, it analogizes human affairs mainly to a short-term biological cycle. This leads it to forge a notion of dynastic cycle and generalize a different mode which I illustrate as the “chain of recurring links.”

Key words: celestial cycle, biological cycle, the uniform rotation, the chain of recurring links.

Introduction

The view of cyclicity in human history has played a crucial role in the ancient civilizations. This view appears in two major modes represented respectively by the Indo-Hellenic tradition and the Chinese one. The former may be characterized with Collingwood’s term of “Uniform rotation” (Collingwood 2014, 14), while the latter I would tentatively phrase as a “chain of recurring links.” This essay plans to compare the two modes, revealing the features of each of them. For the sake of clarity, it will start with a brief discussion on the opponent of cyclicity, namely the view of linearity.

I. The View of Linearity

I.1. The Jewish Tradition

The linear view of history originated from Jewish tradition. It is ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new worldview whose essential premises were eventually appreciated by Christianity and Islam as well. As for the Israelite, heaven declares the glory of God, while human history reveals His will and purpose. “This novel perception,” as Yerushalmi points out, “was not the result of philosophical speculation, but of the peculiar nature of Israelite faith.

It emerged out of an intuitive and revolutionary understanding of God and was refined through profoundly felt historical experience” (Yerushalmi 1996, 8). Here the interlocutor of human is not Nature, but God. As recorded in the *Old Testament*, human history starts with the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden and develops in the process of divine challenge and human response. The way back is closed, and the history will continue until reaching its end of the final judgment, according to Christianity. This linear development with clear beginning and end not only provides people with a conception of historical “wholeness,” but also ensures the meaning of historical events and figures. It is because as Dilthey states, “The category of meaning designates the relationship of parts of life to the whole as rooted in the nature of life...the individual moment has meaning through its connection with the whole, through the relation of past and future, of individual existence and humanity” (Dilthey 2002, 253). The positive meaning comes from the actions that are helpful for human salvation; otherwise, the meaning is negative.

I.2. St. Augustine

It is widely accepted that St. Augustine first distinguished and articulated the two views of history. He writes in *The City of God* that, according to some philosophers, there exist the cycles of time “in which there should be a constant renewal and repetition of the order of nature; and they have therefore asserted that these cycles will ceaselessly recur, one passing away and another coming” (St. Augustine 2010, 354). This passage characterizes the key point in the cyclical view: the order of nature cyclically repeats itself; this movement ceaselessly continues with neither beginning nor end.

Against this view St. Augustine argues that these philosophers “know not how the human race, and this mortal condition of ours, took its origin, nor how it will be brought to an end, since they cannot penetrate the inscrutable wisdom of God. For, though Himself eternal, and without beginning, yet He caused time to have a beginning; and man, whom He had not previously made He made in time, not from a new and sudden resolution, but by his unchangeable and eternal design” (Augustine. 2010, 355). It is God who created both time and human; human history has a clear beginning and end which God already designed.

St. Augustine writes further in an ironical tone that, “According to those philosophers, the same periods and events of time are repeated.” For example, Plato once taught in a school called “Academy.” The same Plato, the same school, and the same disciples will reappear in countless cycles. “Far be it, I say, from us to believe this,” he declared, “For once Christ died for our sins; and, rising from the dead, He dies no more” (Augustine 2010, 355). All historical figures and events come only once; their experience is unrepeatable and irreversible.

On his opponents St. Augustin comments, “‘the wicked walk *in a circle*,’ not because their life is to recur by means of these circles...but because the path in which their false doctrine now runs is circuitous” (Augustine 2010, 355).

Here St. Augustine forms “a theology of history, ...it is based neither upon scientific history nor upon philosophy, but upon the biblical revelation, that is, upon ‘sacred history’” (Richardson 1964, 56). It demonstrates a theological frame in which history develops toward its end. However, there exists in the frame an “interim” between the original fall and the final redemption. The speculation and disputation about its length persisted throughout early Christianity until St. Augustine. He “broke with all millenarianisms and projected the coming [of Jesus Christ] indefinitely into the future.” (Bainton 1983, 220). This “interim,” when translated into modern terms, is simply “the whole of history”; a study about it refers to the “secular history” concerning factual courses in particular space and time.

These two kinds of history, the sacred and the secular co-existed in the Middle Ages. Each of them held its own view of history: the linear and the cyclical. As Pitirim Sorokin observes, “Summing up the main features of the Ideational medieval period, we see that the eschatological (with the two ‘terminal perfect points’) conception and cyclical or endlessly undulating conception occupied the field” (Sorokin 1957, 382).

I.3. Hegel

Hegel translated “the eyes of faith into the eyes of reason and the theology of history established by Augustine into a philosophy of history which is neither sacred nor profane. It is a curious mixture of both, degrading sacred history to the level of secular history and exalting the latter to the first” (Löwith 1949, 59). His work transferred secular content into the Christian frame, and therefore modernized the linear view. He characterized the two views of history with two conceptions: “Nature” and “freedom.” In the cyclical view, human and their history are part of Nature, developing in terms of Nature’s regularity and rhythm. In the linear view, Nature is part of human historical process, submitting to human’s exploitation and manipulation.

About the origin of history, he writes that “Man, created in the image of God...lost his state of absolute contentment by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sin consists here only in the knowledge: this is that which is sinful, and by it man threw away his natural happiness. This is a deep truth, that evil lies in consciousness...Consciousness first occasions the separation of the individual into its boundless freedom as arbitrary choice, and the pure content of will, the good (Hegel 2011, 292).

Due to their “boundless freedom,” humans took an “arbitrary choice” against God’s will. This sinful move starts human history and causes them to suffer from God’s punishment. God told Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground. Since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3, 17-19).

In the historical process of struggling with Nature, humans developed their knowledge and society, moving progressively toward the reconciliation with God. This is not a simple returning to the state of “natural happiness.” “The state of innocence, the paradisaical condition, is that of the brute. Paradise is a park, where only brutes, not men, can remain. For the brute is one with God, yet only in principle [an sich]. Only man is spirit, which is to say, for himself [für sich selbst]” (Hegel 2011, 293). A human’s reconciliation with God contains his self-consciousness, free choice, as well as the identity of his free will and God’s will. Here is the end of sacred history.

Hegel employs the conception of “evil” in two senses. In the sacred history, it denotes human’s negation of God’s will. In the secular history, it signifies various evil actions in factual process: selfish choice, despicable conspiracy, brutal slaughter, etc. In actuality, Hegel offers positive interpretations for both of them. The evil in the sacred starts human history, while evil in the secular promotes its development. It is Hegel’s belief that “world history is nothing but the development of the idea of freedom.” (Hegel 2011, 409) “World history travels from East to West, for Europe is quite the end of history, Asia the beginning. ...The East knew, and to the present day knows only, that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free; the Germanic world knows that all are free” (Hegel 2011, 95). This “freedom of all individuals” signifies the end of secular history.

Hegel’s interpretation of the linear view, as well as his setting “freedom” as the trait of human historical activity, was echoed, enriched, and strengthened by a great number of eminent thinkers. For instance, Marx and Engels describe the Communist society as saying that “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels 1978, 491). In their mind, this will be a “new era” in which “the freedom of all individuals” which Hegel anticipated turns to be a great reality.

II. The Indo-Hellenic view of Cyclicity

Mircea Eliade writes in his research of cyclical view that “we shall begin with the Indian tradition, for it is here that the myth of the eternal return has received its boldest formulation” (Eliade 1971, 112). In the same vein, Joseph Needham states, it is “customary” to contrast the Judeo-Christian view “sharply with that of Greek and Roman world, especially the former, where cyclical conceptions were generally dominant.” However, “Roman thought was rather different” (Needham 1966, 122). He suggests replacing the phrase of “Greco-Roman” with that of “Indo-Hellenic.” Accepting their advice, I will use Needham’s term in what follows.

II.1. The Commonality

Windelband says that “*Christianity...found from the beginning the essence of the whole world-movement in the experiences of personalities: for it external nature was but a theatre for the development of the relation of person to person, and especially of the relations of the finite spirit to the deity*” (Windelband 2006, 256). Agreeing with his observation, I would further argue that essentially the Judeo-Christian linear view is based on an analogy to the life experience of the human individual. Its one-way-development is analogous to his/her life process, its beginning and end to his/her birth and death, its non-repetition and irreversibility to the uniqueness of every step in his/her life-practice. In contrast, the cyclical view is based on an analogy to Nature. This is the same for both the Indo-Hellenic mode and the Chinese one. The following statement about the Indo-Hellenic is also applicable to the Indian and the Chinese. “The classical view never developed beyond the identification of man with Nature; the historical process was only the human counterpart of the periodic rotation of the heaven or the seasons; the repetitive pattern will go on forever” (Richardson 1964, 57-58). The movement in Nature is cyclical. In accordance, the same occurs in human world as well.

In general, there are two patterns of cyclicity in Nature. One is the celestial, such as the regular motion of planets. Another is the biological, such as the alteration from birth to death in plant, animal, and human being. There is a substantial difference between them. What undergoes cyclical motion in the celestial is, for example, the same planet, such as Venus, Mars, or Jupiter. It travels regularly and repeatedly along the same orbit, arriving at the same point in sky at the same time. In contrast, biological beings actually experience biological cycles themselves, rather than the species to which they belong.

Analogizing human history to the celestial cycle, people easily conclude that the cyclicity in both the cosmos and the human world follows the pattern of “uniform rotation.”

Collingwood once sketched out this pattern in the Indo-Hellenic, although what he directly referred to was just the Greek tradition. “The doctrine which haunts Greek cosmology from the Ionians to Aristotle, that the total movement of the world-organism, the movement from which all other movements in the natural world are derived, is a uniform rotation” (Collingwood 2014, 14). This pattern may be understood in the sense of Nietzsche’s “the eternal recurrence of the same” or St. Augustine’s description of the infinite reappearance of Plato and his Academy. It is the first feature of Indo-Hellenic mode that its object of analogy is the celestial cyclicity, and the pattern it uses to describe the movement in both cosmos and human world is the “uniform rotation.”

At the same time, the Indo-Hellenic contains the cycle at two levels: the cosmic and the human. The first refers to the cyclical change in the cosmos, while the second that in human world. Both the Greek conception of “Great Year” and the Indian one of “*Mahayuga*” convey the same idea about periodic change in the cosmos and its necessary impact on the human world. They hold that a regular movement in the celestial realm, after a long travel, arrives at a particular point on which a catastrophic event occurs. Caused by the crisis in the cosmos, the human world experiences the same catastrophe. It is the end of old cycle and the beginning of new one at once. This conception, as Paul Tillich criticizes, conveys a “pessimistic” message that the world is ultimately mastered by cosmic events, and humankind has nothing to do with the predetermined destruction and reconstruction (Tillich 1948, 23, 30). This idea of periodic alteration in the cosmos and its pessimistic impact on the human world is the second feature of the Indo-Hellenic cyclicity.

II.2. The Indian

Although different religious and philosophical schools in ancient India are distinctive from each other on various issues, the idea of cosmic cycle “is a general feature of Indian mythology and philosophy” (Balslev 2009, 145, 171). It teaches that the cyclical movement repeats in the cosmos infinitely. A single cycle consists of four ages of unequal length, each of which also runs its own cycle preceded and followed by a “dawn” and a “dusk.” Originally, the cosmic cycle, *Mahayuga*, is considered as 12,000 years. Later these are defined as “divine years,” each of which lasts for 360 human years. This gives a total of 4,320,000 human years for one cosmic cycle. In correspondence, there are four cycles of humankind in a single cosmic cycle. Humankind passively undergoes through a progressive decrease in the length of life, a corruption in morals, a decline in intelligence, and finally perishes with the destruction of the cosmos.

On another side, “the idea of transmigration is equally a general feature of the conceptual framework in India” (Balslev 209, 146).

It is viewed as a necessary sequel of the doctrine of karma, appearing with different versions in Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism. As Vishnu, the Supreme Being tells in a well-known legend, “Life in the cycle of the countless rebirth is like a vision in a dream.” “Piety and high deeds elevate the inhabitants of the world to the glorious realm of the celestial mansions, or to the higher domains of Brahma and Shiva and to the highest sphere of Vishnu; but wicked acts sink them into the worlds beneath, into pits of pain and sorrow, involving reincarnation among birds and vermin, or out of wombs of pigs and animals of the wild, or among trees, or among insects” (Zimmer 2015, 7-8).

In contrast to the idea of humankind in cosmic cycle, this saying conveys an optimistic message about the cycle of human individuals. It tells that the acts or deeds of human individuals are the only determinant for their next rebirth or reincarnation, and that they themselves hold the key for their own next lives — to be better or worse. It should be noted that here the subject going through “countless rebirth” is not humankind, but the human individual. Essentially, this is a doctrine for human individual’s self-salvation.

The prevalence of this cyclical view of cosmos, humankind, and the human individual actually deprives the Indian of the significance of historiography. Consequently, as a noted modern scholar writes:

...the fact remains that except Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini*, which is merely a local history of Kashmir, there is no other historical text in the whole range of Sanskrit literature which even makes a near approach to it or may be regarded as history in the proper sense of the term. This is a very strange phenomenon, for there is hardly a branch of human knowledge or any topic of human interest which is not adequately represented in Sanskrit literature. The absence of real historical literature is therefore naturally regarded as so very unusual that even many distinguished Indians cannot bring themselves to recognize the obvious fact, and seriously entertain the belief that there were many such historical texts, but that they have all perished (Majumdar 1961, 25).

This state looks rather striking especially when compared with the stance toward history in many Indian contemporaries: the Judeo-Christian, the Chinese, and even the Greek. The correct interpretation may be that, according to the Indian metaphysics and epistemology, “both time and history are depreciated as illusory, and to be liberated from such illusion is a condition for true knowledge and ultimate salvation (Yerushalmi 1996, 7). The other forms of literature and arts are all helpful for promoting the notion of illusion, so that they flourished. On the contrary, as for the enhancement of the notion, the historiography is not only superfluous, but even harmful.

The lesson people learn from the contrast between the pessimism of humankind and the optimism of human individual is that, instead of entangling with history, a human individual should live at present, focusing his/her mind on the highest truth and practicing moral cultivation for reaching a better state in next life and for attaining eventually “the glorious realm of the celestial mansion.”

II.3. The Greek

It is broadly true that major thinkers in the ancient Greek world all hold a notion of the cosmic cycle. Plato assumes the cause of its occurrence in a well-known passage:

There is an era in which God himself assists the universe on its way and guides it by imparting its rotation to it. There is also an era in which he releases his control. He does this when its circuit under his guidance has completed the due limit of the time thereto pointed. Thereafter it begins to revolve in the contrary sense under its own impulse — for it is a living creature and has been endowed with reason by him who framed it in the beginning. Now this capacity for rotation in reverse is of necessity native to it (Plato 1989, 1034).

In this passage “rotation” is described as the way in which God runs the universe. Meanwhile it is the “capacity” of the universe by which it undergoes in a direction reverse to the guidance of God. In other words, the rotational or cyclical movement is the same for both God and the Universe. The change of motion which the universe starts, according to Plato, is a “cosmic crisis” which “we must regard as the most important and the most complete of all ‘turning-back’ occurring in the celestial orbits.” In this “great event” all the living beings in the universe must “undergo the most drastic changes” (Plato 1989, 1035). About what happens to humankind in the crisis, Plato proposes two assumptions.

In the *Statesman*, the reverse motion in the universe destroys almost all human beings. A few remnants “began to grow backward, as it were, toward youth and ever greater immaturity, returning gradually to the condition of a newborn children in mind as well as in body, and fading finally into non-existence one by one” (Plato 1989, 1036). Later, God takes back its control, adjusting the rotation to its original direction. As a result, something dramatic occurs in our planet:

Our legends tell us that once upon a time there was an earthborn race. Now it was this race which at that moment of crisis began to return to life out of earth. ...[It is] a new race formed from men dead and long laid in earth but now formed in her womb anew and thence returning to life once more. Such resurrection of the dead was in keeping with the cosmic change, all creation being now turned in the reverse direction. This race was, as it needs must be, ‘born from the earth’” (Plato 1989, 1036).

Two points are remarkable in this passage. First, humankind is in keeping with the cosmic cycles of destruction and reconstruction, repeating the process of death and rebirth. Secondly, the new race comes from earth, gradually evolves to be humankind today, and will perish into the earth again. This idea, in my opinion, anticipates the modern conception of evolution. The “earth-born” may be regarded as single-celled or multicellular organisms arising out of water. After billion-years evolution, it becomes in turn to be fish, mammal, homo erectus, and finally human being.

In his *Timaeus* Plato conceives of another scenario. With the eruption of a “great event,” the destructive disasters occur everywhere. “At such time, those who live upon the mountain and in dry and lofty places are more liable to destruction than those who dwell by rivers or on the seashore.” “The survivors...are herdsmen and shepherds who dwell on the mountains, but those who...live in cities are carried by the rivers into the sea” (Plato 1989, 1157). Obviously, the city residents are more educated, having recorded important cultural events and preserved the recordings in libraries or temples. With their destruction, the cultural achievements kept there vanish as well. Hence humans have “to begin all over again like children and know nothing of what happened in ancient times” (Plato 1989, 1158).

After hearing a description of the deluge, Plato says through his narrator’s mouth that “In the first place you remember a single deluge only, but there were many previous ones; in the next place, you do not know that there formerly dwelt in your land the fairest and noblest race of men which ever lived, and that your whole city are descended from a small seed or remnant of them which survived” (Plato 1989, 1158). Here Plato proposes a new theory of cyclicity in human world. Instead of raising from the earth and undergoing a long evolution, humankind develops itself from a small lucky group of mountaineers. In other words, humankind is not totally destroyed, although the advancement of its civilization is suspended for a long time.

Plato’s notion of cosmic cycle and its human consequence seems to be common knowledge among Greek thinkers. For example, we read in Aristotle that “probably each art and each science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished, these opinions, with others, have been preserved until the present like relics of the ancient treasures” (Aristotle 1941, 884).

Plato names a cosmic cycle as a “Great Year.” He himself never accurately defines its length. Among modern scholars, there are various calculations. J. B. Bury holds that “The period of its duration is 72,000 solar years” (Bury 2010, 21). However, William Strauss and Neil Howe suggest that “The 12,000-year ‘great year’ or yuga was especially popular in the Babylonian, Hindu, and Hellenistic worlds, since it roughly coincides with an astronomical cycle today known as the procession of the eclipse” (Strauss & Howe 1997, 29).

Compared with the length of cosmic cycle, that of human individual cycle/lifespan is unproportionally short. This fact entices a human individual to think about his/her relationship with the cosmic cycle, as well as that with his/her species of humankind. It is Plato's position that:

There is a sense in which mankind naturally partakes of immortality, a prize our nature makes desirable to all of us in its every form, for to win renown and not lie in our graves without a name is a desire of this. Thus, the race of man is time's equal twin and companion, bound up with him in a union never to be broken, and the manner of their immortality is in this wise. By succession of generations the race abides one and the same, so partaking immortality through procreation" (Plato 1989, 1311).

Humankind undergoes its human cycle within the cosmic cycle, experiencing birth, growth, aging, and death along with the path of cosmos. It is "time's equal twin and companion" and its life can be as long as that of cosmic cycle. Meanwhile, the "immortality" is the attribute of humankind as a species, not that of any individual in the species. It can be actualized only through a collective "recurrent cycle of life" (Arendt 2000, 278). Put differently, it is human individuals that partake the immortality of humankind through their continuous "reproduction." What Plato depicts here may be illustrated as a "chain" of humankind. It is composed of countless "links" of human individuals, extending along with the continuous recurrence of links.

Different from the Indian human cycle, what undergoes the cycle in Plato is not the same soul or selfhood, but countless individuals. In the meantime, what really concerns Plato in the present issue is not the uniqueness of each individual in the chain of humankind, but the chain itself. As will be shown in next section, the Chinese cyclicity is similar to Plato's idea of "chain of recurring links." At the same time, in contrast to Plato, what is emphasized in the Chinese is not the chain itself, but the individuality of each link.

III. The Chinese

III.1. Joseph Needham's Findings

Since the 16th century, the conception of progress, which was "transformed" from Judeo-Christian linearity, emerged, and developed to be a common opinion. The European thinkers started to use it as an intellectual stick to measure other civilizations. About the Chinese they claimed that it was, "in Ranke's famous phrase, in a state of 'eternal standstill'" (Dawson 1967, 65). Summarizing this intellectual tendency, Hegel concluded that China stood as a country that exists today as we know it to have been in the ancient times. It is possessed of nothing "historical," and stays "still outside the world's history" (Hegel 2011, 105).

Especially from the 20th century, this position met serious criticism from a number of eminent Sinologists. Regarding the general conviction about the Chinese view of history in Europe, Joseph Needham raised a sharp question, “where did it [Chinese civilization] stand in the contrast between linear irreversible time and the ‘myth of eternal recurrence’? There can be no doubt that it had elements of both conceptions, but broadly speaking, ...linearity, in my opinion, dominated” (Needham, 132-133). Again, “On the whole China was a culture more of the Iran-Judeo-Christian type than the Indo-Hellenic” (Needham 1966, 135).

Needham argues for his conclusion with following reasons. First, “China should have possessed perhaps the greatest of all ancient historical traditions. One can say without hesitation that the Chinese were the most historically minded of all ancient peoples” (Needham 1966, 101). His observation unavoidably leads people to ask: How is it possible that the “most historically minded” people have lived in “eternal standstill” and possessed nothing “historical,” as claimed by Ranke and Hegel?

Secondly, the conception of evolution has always dominated Chinese thinking. “As soon as one looks at the ideas of traditional Chinese culture on living things, one finds that they never had any belief in the fixity of species. This followed because they never had any conception of special creation, and that was because creation *ex nihilo* by a Supreme Deity was itself unimagined by them; consequently, there was no reason to believe that different kinds of living thing could not turn into each other quite easily, given sufficient time” (Needham 1966, 108). For the Chinese mind, the appearance of novelty is always possible; repetition is not the only pattern for the development in species.

Thirdly, in contrast to the Indo-Hellenic, the Chinese view of history is mainly analogous to the short-term biological cycle rather than the long-term celestial one. In China, “while cyclical recurrence was indeed prominent in the natural philosophy, it was almost entirely the cycle of the annual seasons — months, days, hours, etc., and of those which present themselves in biological or social organisms — long-term astronomical period played an insignificant part, and the ‘Great Year’ conception...with their consequence of temporal recurrence, none at all” (Needham 1966, 99). As will be shown later, it is the analogy to a short-term cycle of biological organism and the absence of the conception of “Great Year” that distinguishes the Chinese cyclicity from the Indo-Hellenic one.

Finally, similar to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Chinese has also set a *telo*, or end for historical development. They are “Grand Togetherness” (*datong*) and “Great Peace and Equality” (*taiping*) (Needham 1966, 113). The end of history for the Judeo-Christian, according to Hegel, is freedom of each individual. In contrast, the Chinese “Grand togetherness” and “Great Peace and Equality” emphasize the collective prosperity and common happiness for all people in the world.

It is true that Needham's conclusion is not widely accepted in the Sinologist community. For instance, N. Sivin writes, "The cyclical time sense by that time was neither Daoist, Legalist, Confucian, nor Moist; it had become, once for all the non-specialist's mode of thinking about natural process...The other time senses — compartmented, progressive, repressive — were not in competition with that one" (Sivin 1986, 152). It is my opinion: in the sense that the dominant view in the Chinese is cyclicity, I agree with Sivin. Meanwhile, Needham's findings are truly significant and inspiring. Incorporating the ideas from both Sivin and Needham, I would further explore the features of Chinese cyclicity in what follows.

III.2. Heaven and Cosmos

The Chinese counterpart of Indo-Hellenic "cosmos," roughly speaking, is Heaven (*tian*). This term is mainly used in two senses: the mother Nature and the supreme deity or naturalistic Heaven and anthropomorphic Heaven. Instead of asking what Heaven is, Chinese thinkers tend to question what Heaven may impact on human or how we use knowledge about it for our own service. A passage from Xunzi (third century BCE) well exemplifies this approach:

When he (the sage) turns his thought to Heaven, he seeks to understand only those phenomena which can be regularly expected. When he turns his thought to Earth, he seeks to understand only those aspects that can be taken advantage of. When he turns to the four seasons, he seeks to understand only the changes that will affect his undertakings. When he turns his thought to the *yin* and *yang*, he seeks to understand only the modulations which call for some action on his part (Wang 1977, 310).

Thanks to this approach Heaven and human are combined into a unity from the very beginning; Heaven is often understood through its connection to humans. In general, their relationship stands in two forms: the "interactive" and the "correlative." The former stresses that an action in Heaven or humanity directly results in a corresponding response or resonance from the other. The latter seeks to align the human world with the normative pattern of Heaven (Queen 1996, 225). The mainstream Chinese thinkers accept neither the notion of "cosmic cycle" which periodically repeats the same destruction, nor that of humankind whose destiny is fatally determined by cosmic change

In the Chinese legend, there might be no natural disaster more harmful than the catastrophic flooding in the time of Great Yu. However, as known by all Chinese, the flood was finally channeled to the East Sea due to the endeavor of Great Yu and his people. Its message is clear: Heaven has never intended to destroy the human world; humans are capable of overcoming environmental difficulties.

Instead of the periodic interruption signified by the Great Year or *Mahayuga*, the Chinese describe the movement of the unity of Heaven and humanity as a chain continuously extending to the future. This is the first feature of Chinese cyclicity.

As a matter of fact, the Chinese absence of “cosmic cycle” mainly results from their non-interest in the notion, rather than their lack of philosophical imagination. For instance, Shao Yong (1011-1077 C.E.), under the inspiration of Buddhism, proposed a theory similar to the Indian *Mahayuga* (Fung Yu-lan, 473). It assumes that a cosmic cycle (*yuan*) is one of 129,600 years, divided into 12 epochs (*hui*) of 10,800 years each. When the cosmos, in its movement, attains the eleventh epoch, all things are closed, and all of them, including humankind in the cosmos come to destruction. The end of old cycle, at the same time, starts a new one; the same process repeats itself infinitely. On this theory Zhu Xi (1113-1200) comments, “It simply refers to the rise and fall of *yin* and *yang*. It is roughly right (*dashu kejian*), but the sage and the worthy have never advocated this kind of doctrine” (Zhu Xi 1986, 78). His comment reflects a view generally shared among Chinese intellectual elites that the idea of cosmic cycle is a common knowledge or truism. However, it is unworthy for people to spend energy for its exploration since it has little social and historical significance.

Dong Zhongshu (c. 179-c. 104 BCE) in the Han dynasty investigated both the cyclicity in Heaven and that in human world. He writes, “Heaven has Five Agents: the first is Wood; the second, Fire; the third, Earth; the fourth, Metal; and the fifth, Water. Wood is the beginning of the cycle of Five Agents, Water is its end, and Earth is center. Such is their natural sequence” (Su Yu 1992, 321). Here “Heaven” stands as a naturalistic concept. In another place, however, he states that “Heaven is the great overlord of the numerous spirits. If you do not complete your service on Heaven, then even the assistance of the numerous spirits will not bring any advantages” (Su Yu 1992, 398). Now Heaven seems to designate a deity. Incorporating these two uses, Dong replies to the Emperor Wu’s (r. 141-87 BCE) question as saying that, “I have heard that Heaven is the ancestor of all things. Therefore, Heaven supports and protects them all without exception. It establishes the sun, moon, wind, and rain to bring them into harmony. It regulates *yin*, *yang*, heat, and cold to bring them to maturity. This is the reason why the sages emulated Heaven and established the Way” (Ban Gu 2017, 2525). Paradoxically, the “ambiguity” of the two uses provides Dong with an advantage in conveying his message. Here the anthropomorphic Heaven plays a role of setting purpose and making decisions, while the naturalistic one materializes them in tangible natural phenomena.

Upon this account Dong proposes his doctrine of the Heavenly Way. “What harmonizes everything with no disorder and revolves cyclically with no end is called the Way...The great origin of the Way is Heaven. Heaven does not change. Likewise, the Way does not change” (Ban Gu 2017, 2518-19). The Heavenly Way is constant, moving cyclically without end.

It demonstrates itself in the human world as “a path leading to orderly government” (Ban Gu, 2499). Taking the path, the sage kings ruled their countries in harmony; deviating from it, the corrupt kings brought their countries chaos.

In conformity with his idea of cyclicity in Heaven, Dong formulates a doctrine of “Three Systems” in the human world. It tells that Xia dynasty (trad. 2205-1766 BCE) constitutes the Black System with “loyalty” as its principle; Shang dynasty (trad. 1766-1123, BCE) constitutes the White System with “piety” as its principle; and the Zhou dynasty (1122? -256, BCE) constitutes the Red System with “refinement” as its principle. He declares that “all kings must apply [one of the three].” “Now the Han dynasty is the successor to an age of great chaos. It seems appropriate to diminish some ‘refinement’ of Zhou and employ the ‘loyalty’ of Xia” (Ban Gu, 2519). Dong’s statement implies that the alteration among dynasties follows a cyclicity of “loyalty”-“piety” — “refinement” and the same cycle of Black-White-Red will repeat itself.

Superficially, Dong simply talks about dynastic change: each of the three dynasties completed its cycle and was succeeded by another one. However, an analysis in depth will reveal that what he studied is not the cycle in a single dynasty, but the long-term cycle comprised of three phases. In other words, what truly concerns Dong is not the completion of a single dynastic cycle, but the regularity in and the repetition of the long-term cultural cycle of loyalty, piety, and refinement. Guided by Dong’s thinking, Sima Qian (c. 145-c. 90 BCE) further points out that:

The government of Xia was marked by loyalty, which in time deteriorated until mean men turned it into rusticity. Therefore, the men of Shang who succeeded to Xia reformed this defect through piety. But piety degenerated until mean men made it a superstitious concern for the spirits. Therefore, the men of Zhou who succeeded corrected this fault through refinement. But refinement again deteriorated until it became in the hands of the mean a mere hollow show. Therefore, what was needed to reform it was a return to loyalty. For the way of three dynasties of old is like a cycle which, when it ends, must begin over again (Sima 1975, 392).

In addition to reiterating Dong’s doctrine of “Three Systems,” Sima enhances it with two points. First, he reveals the dynamic for the successive phases of the cultural cycle. In terms of his opinion, what causes the transition from one dynasty to another is moral factors. This theory is applied in his entire work of *Records of Grand Historian* and encourages Chinese historians in later times to concentrate on moral reasons when studying political events. Secondly, he assures the infinite recurrence of the same cycle of loyalty, piety, and refinement. This changes an implied opinion in Dong to be an explicit law and changes the essence of the Han’s returning to “loyalty” from a matter of political wisdom to that of historical necessity.

Sima's theory is fully reflected in Ban Gu's (32-92 CE) *Discourse in the White Tiger Hall*. Because of the fact that Ban's book compiled the political and philosophical positions from a conference in which the Emperor Zhang (r. 76-80 CE) himself attended and acted as final judge on controversies, it has been viewed as representing national ideology in the later Han times (25-220 CE). This means also that Sima's idea of the necessity of cultural cycle is widely accepted by Chinese intellectual elites then.

III.3. The Biological Cycle and the Celestial Cycle

In contrast to the Indo-Hellenic, especially from the 6th century, the Chinese philosophy of nature often appealed to the biological pattern in its elucidation of natural cyclicity and paid attention to the individuality of short-term cycles. Due to the notion of "correlative" relationship between Heaven and human, the pattern was analogized into human affairs and helped to form a doctrine of dynastic changes. This emphasis on the individuality of short-term cycle in Nature and the unique completion of each dynastic cycle in human world signifies the second feature of Chinese cyclicity.

III.3.1. The Cycle in Nature

The Neo-Confucian philosophers rarely had concern with anthropomorphic Heaven. As for them, Heaven meant Mother Nature and the Heavenly Way meant the regularity in cyclical alterations in Nature, such as those in biological organisms. A dialogue between Zhu Xi and his student records that, "Someone asks, 'When Heaven brings into being sages, is it only the effect of chance and not a matter of design?' The master replies, how could Heaven and earth say: 'We will now proceed to produce sages?' It simply comes about that the required quantities of air meet in perfect mutual concordance, and thus a sage is born. And when this happens, it looks as if Heaven had done it by design" (Zhu Xi 1988, 80).

In another place, Zhu Xi defines Heaven, "What the blue sky signifies is Heaven. It is just that which moves and changes cyclically and constantly. It is definitely improper to say that Heaven is a deity who evaluates and rebukes evil doings, and the same is to another saying that there is no regulator in Heaven" (Zhu Xi 1988, 5). Obviously, "Heaven" in these two passages designates either Mother Nature or blue sky. The birth of sages, as well as that of all historical figures, comes simply from the "concordance of air," rather than any deity's conscious design. Meanwhile, the "regulator" of Heaven/Nature in Zhu Xi refers to the "principle" (*li*) which exists in the material element of "air." (Zhu Xi 1988, 1690).

About the "principle" Zhu Xi says that "'Origination, penetration, advance, and perseverance' [together] designate the 'principle,' while the 'air' fills these four phases. When there are the four phases, in them there must be the principle. The principle and air cannot separate from each other."

To illustrate this point clearer he picks up a case of grain. “In a grain’s life, sprouting is ‘origination,’ seedling is ‘penetration,’ earing is ‘advance,’ and seeding is ‘perseverance.’ The seed of a grain will start a new life cycle. This cyclical process will recur infinitely” (Zhu Xi 1988, 1689). About the cycles and their continuity Zhu Xi further states:

[The cycle of] ‘origination, penetration, advance, and perseverance’ goes on without interruption. After ‘perseverance’ there comes ‘origination’ again; before the hours *zi* (23:00-1:00) today it is the hours *hai* (21:00-23:00) yesterday. A thing has its summer, autumn, winter, and birth [spring]. We sense its energy of life when thinking about this. It itself possesses a ‘little origination-penetration-advance-perseverance.’ (Zhu Xi 1988, 1690).

In terms of this depiction, a category of thing, such as wheat species, continues its life through endless appearance of individual wheat A, B, C, etc. In other words, it is the life-process of individual wheat A, B, C, etc. that respectively forms their own cycles (links) in the category of wheat and ensures the continuous extension of its chain. This pattern is similar to that of human immortality through recurrent cycles of individual life, which Plato described. However, it is important to note that, in terms of Zhu Xi’s analysis, Wheat A is endowed with its own “little origination-penetration-advance-perseverance,” or individuality which characterizes it as a unique wheat and differentiates it from wheat B or C.

III. 3. 2. The Cycle in Humans

From the beginning of the 3rd century to the end of the 6th century, the Chinese world experienced a disastrous upheaval. The long-time social and political turbulence not only interrupted the regular succession of dynasties described by Dong and Sima, but also discredited their doctrine of cultural cycle. In correspondence to what changed in natural philosophy and in political reality, there appeared a doctrine of dynastic cycle.

In fact, the dynastic cycle is not a conception unique to Chinese tradition. For instance, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), a fourteenth-century Islamic historian, proposes a similar idea of “life span of dynasty.” He claims that:

In the opinion of physicians and astrologers, the natural life span of individuals is one hundred and twenty years, that is, the period astrologers call the great lunar year. Within the same generation, the duration of life differs according to the conjunctions...The same applies to the life span of dynasties. Their duration may differ according to the conjunctions. However, as a rule no dynasty lasts beyond the life span of three generations (Khaldun 2005, 136).

Based on the correlative thought prevalent in his time, Ibn Khaldun points out a time period common to the three fields: the movement of stars, the natural life span of human individuals, and the cycle of dynasties. It is his conclusion that the years for a dynasty to complete its cycle is fixed; it is a “rule” that nobody can change or avoid.

Ibn Khaldun discusses the cause for the fixity of dynastic years. The first generation of a dynasty retains the desert qualities, desert toughness, and desert savagery. The second generation, under the influence of royal authority and a life of ease, “changes from the desert attitude to sedentary culture.” The third generation has completely “forgotten the period of desert life and toughness, as if it had never existed.” He insists that, “In the course of these three generations, the dynasty grows senile and is worn out. Therefore, it is in the fourth generation that (ancestral) prestige is destroyed” (Khaldun 2005: 137). In his mind, “these stages are natural for the growth of dynasties.” On this doctrine Grace Cairns comments, “Actually, he traces only the rise and fall cycle of a dynasty, but his generalizations by implication apply to the course of an entire civilization” (Cairns 1962, 323-4).

Ibn Khaldun’s conceptions of “fixity of dynastic years” and “natural necessity behind dynastic change” are strange to the Chinese mind. Chinese thinkers take it as a simple fact that the time for a dynastic cycle has never been fixed. The Qin dynasty lasts 14 years, while the Han 400 years. Both the Yuan and Qing are minority dynasties, but the former lasts 62 years, while the latter 257 years. As Ma Duanlin states, “the reason by which the Jin wins the whole country differs from that of the Han, and the reason due to which the Sui loses its sovereign over the country differs from that of the Tang” (Ma Duanlin 1986, 3). Moreover, partially because of Sima Qian’s influence, Chinese thinkers often believe that the dynastic cycle and its successive phases are not “the product of natural law or blind fate. The dynamic behind them was moral, and the lessons to be drawn from the study of dynastic rise and fall were moral lessons” (Wright 1963, 41).

These two distinctions bring about the third one. Chinese thinkers recognize that there has never been an eternal dynasty in the long history of China; the dynasties all completed their own cycles in this or that way. However, if the ultimate dynamic for dynastic change were moral factors, and if moral faults, theoretically, could be corrected through moral cultivation, people might have good reason to expect an avoidance or, at least, a postponement of a cycle’s completion. With this conviction Sima Guang (1019-1086) memorializes his Emperor in regard to his great *General Mirror for the Aid of Government* as writing that, “Disregarding my inadequacy I have constantly wished to write a chronological history...taking in all that a prince ought to know--- everything pertaining to the rise and decline of dynasties and the good and ill fortune of the common people, all good and bad examples that can furnish models and warning” (Sima Guang 1986, 9608).

He “views the rise and fall of dynasty as an established rhythm, but he implies that a wise prince can learn from past cycles to make the moral choice that will protract the prosperity of his house” (Wright 1963, 41). There exists a dilemma in his mind which I would phrase as “an intellectual tension.” On the one hand, the great historian believes that all dynasties, including the one in which he lives, must complete their own cycles. On the other hand, thanks to the possibility analyzed above, he expects that his effort will assist the Song dynasty to enjoy a cycle that is longer and more harmonious.

The same tension exists in most Chinese thinkers. For instance, Cheng Yi exclaims, “How great the human endeavor is! It always co-exists with Heaven and earth. Therefore, humans can even triumph over the command of Heaven [in a certain sense]. One who is good at nourishing his life may lengthen his years from death; one who is good at protecting his country may prolong his reign from ending. There are truly things as such” (Cheng and Cheng 2004, 1224). As for him, although both the life of a person and that of a dynasty have their limits, there is still enough room for people to choose between the good or bad, and to lengthen or shorten their lives. In fact, what is mainly conveyed in his message is not the limit itself, but the freedom for choice within the limit.

The three points mentioned above, the individuality of a dynasty, the intellectual tension, and the freedom for choice in a dynastic cycle — constitute a powerful philosophical conviction. It furnishes Chinese society with a positive energy, encouraging people, especially their rulers, to correct their moral mistakes for themselves and for the country. Meanwhile, it brings to Chinese mind an optimistic spirit, opening enough room for people to make their own choice.

Conclusion

Nicolas Berdyaev, when discussing the superiority of Judeo-Christian tradition over other ancient traditions, writes that “The completely unhistorical or anti-historical nature of the ancient cultures of both India and China is due to the fact that the freedom of the creative subject was not revealed therein” (Berdyaev 2009, 111). This saying is wrong in two senses. First, it confuses the Indian view of history with the Chinese one. Second, its claim about the nature of Chinese culture is groundless.

In contrast to the Indo-Hellenic, there exists no conception of Great Year or *Mahayuga* in the Chinese. It means that both the cosmic cycle with its periodic interruption and the humankind who have to accept passively the cosmic consequence are not Chinese notions. Furthermore, the Chinese frequently relate historical process to the biological cycle. This approach underlines the individuality of each dynasty and assigns morality as the dynamic for the dynastic change. Berdyaev is correct at one point that the “freedom of the creative subject” is the condition for historical consciousness.

With the same token, I would argue that the secret of great Chinese tradition of historiography lies in “the freedom for choice within the limit” and in the possibility of learning from history to prolong and harmonize the cycle of one’s dynasty.

The second mistake in Berdyaev lies in his misunderstanding of the characteristic of Chinese mode of cyclicity, as well as the specialty of their consciousness of history. Differing from the Indo-Hellenic “uniform rotation,” the Chinese mode may be phrased as “a chain of recurring links.” The chain is composed of countless links, while the links connect with each other seamlessly and each undergoes the same cyclical process. The “cyclicity” is common to all links; it is not the chain itself, but each of its links that cyclically develops. The emergence of new links is infinite, and so is the extension of the chain. Meanwhile, the links are not uniform; they may differ from each other in thickness, length, or strength. For example, a plant withers, while leaving behind weak or strong seeds that will result in a different harvest next year. A father dies, while leaving behind an uneducated or educated son who will make the same family less or more prosperous. Similarly, a dynasty perishes, but the new one established on its ruin may learn bad or good lessons from its predecessor. In this way the category (chain) of plant, family, and dynasty extend forward through the appearance of new members (links) in their categories.

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