

# A HARMONY ACCOUNT OF CHINESE IDENTITY

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*Abstract: This paper argues that the Chinese concept of harmony is exemplified in the historical process that resulted in the Chinese people and the geographic entity of China itself. The concept of harmony overcomes the dualism between identity and heterogeneity and is best understood through the paradigm of the organic. This paper will first outline the three conventional, dualistic, (mis)understandings of the nature of the Chinese people and China in the mainstream Western academe: (1) in racial terms, that is, as possessing the “essence” of Chinese-ness, (2) the Chinese people were created through “sinicization” – understood as replacing one culture with another, (3) neither China nor the Chinese people ever existed; what existed was merely heterogeneous particulars without an overall coherence. In place of these dualistic explanations, it will be argued that the concept of the harmony – understood as an organic coherence among particulars – is the most accurate way to understand the Chinese people and China as an entity. An organism maintains coherence among the parts despite constant changes to the particulars which constitute its body. This organic harmony is exemplified in the historical process that produced the Chinese people and China.*

## Introduction

The metaphysics which underlies the concept of harmony is best understood through an *organic* paradigm in which the whole is not a *thing* but the coherence and responsiveness between the parts and between the parts with the whole. This conception of the (functional) whole means that it is not existentially threatened by change. We can see this paradigm of harmony in Chinese history itself. Despite constant changes to its landmass, peoples and cultures throughout the millennia, Chinese *identity* was continuous. That there is identity (in the sense of self-identity) without identity (in the sense of sameness) testifies to a worldview not governed by a metaphysics of essence transcending underlying change. Identity here is not defined by its essence. This conception of self-identity as requiring sameness is one of the main characteristics of (Western) substance ontology. The dualistic thinking which the concept of harmony overcomes, dualisms which characterize the majority of western philosophy, has negative parallels in the course of western history. This Western metaphysics of essence has its historical parallels in the Athenian emphasis on autochthony, and an assumption that change and difference results in non-being. Change as that which results in difference is understood as an existential threat to Being and by extension, existence. The concept of harmony escapes the illusory dualism of Universalism (identity) and (solipsistic) relativism (chaos), Arche (single

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order) and anarchy (mere particularism) in which mainstream Western theory and practice is stuck. The concept of harmony potentially challenges the previous colonial (substance ontology) way of dealing with difference, i.e. identity, which involves the extermination of difference.

### I. Overcoming (False) Dualisms: The Hybrid Nature of Chinese Identity

There are three enduring misconceptions about Chinese history in the Western<sup>1</sup> academe: (1) that the “Chinese” people have always been Chinese and (2) “sinicization” is a one-way influence between the center and the periphery. Both these conceptions are used to explain the longevity and success of China as a political entity. (3) Relatedly, it has now become fashionable to “deconstruct” China as an entity, to use local identities, margins, shifting of identities (and other postmodernist vocabularies of this kind) to challenge the idea that there ever was a “China.”<sup>2</sup> The reason this misunderstanding of Chinese history persists is because the key aspects of the Western worldview is dictated by dualisms which prevent it from grasping the (nondualist) nature of the Chinese experience.

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<sup>1</sup> By the “West” as a geo-political entity, I refer specifically to all those political entities that colonized, i.e. subjugated peoples they deemed to be inferior to themselves, since the “Age of Discovery” and so are most responsible for global inequality in the world today. This definition of the “West” overlaps to a great extent with the definition of the West as those who were formed by a Greco-Christian heritage and converges geographically with the Western European countries and the Anglo-Saxon countries (USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) appropriated through colonization. In case the reader feels that I am essentializing the West, it should be borne in mind that it was the “West” who first essentialized or defined themselves in this way. That is, as superior to the darker races and so bear “the white man’s burden” to free, in Rudyard Kipling’s words, the “new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child.” I am therefore only citing the “West’s” own self-definition of itself.

<sup>2</sup> I have problematized this tendency to deconstruct China as a coherent historical entity as a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” (Xiang 2018, “Orientalism and Enlightenment Positivism: A Critique of Anglophone Sinology, Comparative Literature, and Philosophy”) The “hermeneutics of suspicion” was a term coined by Paul Ricoeur to characterize the skeptical/critical attitude about tradition found in the likes of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. The great irony is that this hermeneutics of suspicion – used to critically assess one’s *own* tradition – is used by a dominant strand in the Western tradition to critically assess the Chinese tradition. In this way, and under the context of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the application of the hermeneutics of suspicion becomes a tool (on the part of many Western scholars) to delegitimize the cultural, intellectual, socio-political coherence of China as a historical entity. The application of the hermeneutics of suspicion to the Chinese tradition on the part of the Western academe becomes a form of orientalism. The examples I provide in this paper to exemplify the kind of scholarship that seeks to undermine the coherence of historical China is the editorial introduction to *Remapping China: Fissures in Historical Terrain* (Xiang 2018: 28-29)

A conventional expression of the first view – the persistent stereotype of China as a land which has always been homogeneously “Chinese”<sup>3</sup> – goes something like this: “China has *been* [emphasis in the original] Chinese, almost from the beginnings of its recorded history” (Diamond 1998: 323). Likewise, Witold Rodzinski’s *The Walled Kingdom: History of China from 2000 B.C. to the Present*, paints China as a passive patient being stimulated by the entrepreneurial agency of the British traders. Likewise, for the sinologist Olga Lang, “imperial China was a static civilization” characterized by a “stagnant character” (Lang 1946: 10-11, 333). The fact is that the pervasive (Western) conception of China as a homogeneous entity, landlocked and stagnating in the eternal return of (Mircea Eliade’s) primitive man before its “discovery” by the West is an orientalizing myth. The idea that Chinese civilizations are static finds paradigmatic expression in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*: “China and India remain stationary and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time” (Hegel 1956: 173). Teshale Tibebu’s characterisation of Hegel’s India applies equally to Hegel’s China: “in Hegel’s India [or China], time froze in the cold of permanent hibernation” (Tibebu 2011: 272). Contrary to this orientalizing stereotype, China was, of course, never static; it was a highly dynamic entity. From the inception of its recorded history, China was a hybrid product. When the narrative of early Chinese history was constructed in the late Spring and Autumn times, “the reputed progenitors of a very large number of groups were worked into the tapestry”<sup>4</sup> (Creel 1970: 225). Later, the Sui-Tang empires “were pluralistic realms containing tens of millions of people who had different ethnicities, regional traditions, status rankings, and religions” (Skaff 2012: 10).

Western scholars are not wrong to be astonished at the unity of Chinese history but are wrong to think that this unity is because China had always been “Chinese” – that is to say, racially and culturally homogenous – or that it merely turned those under its sphere of influence “Chinese.” What undermines the conventional image of a homogeneous Chinese race is that the throughout Chinese history, China “always comprised groups of more or less unassimilated minorities” and “even the so-called ‘Han’ 汉 people appear much less homogenous than it is often imagined” (Pines 2009: 223, footnote 4). The “Han” epithet which 90 percent of “Chinese” people identify themselves with, is obviously not what the West understands by the concept of

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<sup>3</sup> I place “Chinese” in quotation marks to alert the reader to the fact it would be anachronistic to assume that the way we use the term “China” today, that is, as a nation-state applies to its various near-equivalents throughout history. In the pre-Qin period, for example, *zhongguo* would have mean the “central states.” Another near equivalent, “Huaxia,” according to *The Rectified Interpretation of Zuo’s Spring and Autumn Annals* refers to the domains which enjoy ritual propriety (*liyi*, 礼仪) and ceremonial dress (*fuzhang*, 服章). The *Rectified Interpretation of the Book of Documents* explains that illustrious clothing and headwear is called “hua” and large states are called “xia.”

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I used literatures from Western historians/sinologists instead of literatures from Chinese historians so as to avoid the cynical rebuke that Chinese historians are apologists and so their works unreliable.

“race.” Race is traditionally understood as a biological descriptor of a group of peoples related by common descent or heredity or referring to “immutable major division of humankind, each with biologically transmitted characteristics” (Hannaford 1996: 17). The “Chinese” people are not a single stock of people, they are the hybrid result of a coalescing of originally different peoples from the geographical region of present-day China and its environs (Ge 2018: 25; Fairbank and Goldman 2006: 25). In sum, historical China was a porous and dynamic organism which was enriched by the many peoples and cultures which it embraced, as the title of Valerie Hansen’s history of China, *The Open Empire*, suggests. Another way of explaining the unity of China is through the paradigm of “sinicization.” Inasmuch as “sinicization” suggests a one-way influence between the center and the periphery, this is an inaccurate way to describe the formation of China and its history. “China” never merely made those that it drew into its orbit identical to itself, the (Chinese) centre itself changed as there was a reciprocal exchange of identities between the centre and the periphery (Bauer 1980: 7-8; Gernet 1982: 12). Whilst it is impossible to map out all the cross-fertilisations of history, we know that China was enriched by cultures – ancient Mesopotamia, pre-Islamic Iran, India, Islam, the Christian West – which were “were profoundly alien to it by their very nature” (Gernet 1982: 20) and we can be sure that contributions from foreign cultures was historically “considerable” (Gernet 1982: 175). Both the homogeneity and the sinicization paradigms explain the unity of China by appealing to a dualistic explanation.

The third model falls on the other side of the dualism and posits that there never was any unity to historical China. The epistemological error underlying the appeal to both sides of this dualism in explaining the nature of Chinese identity is a deeply engrained substance-mode of thinking in Western philosophy and culture. Under this mode of thinking, unity can *only* be a result of substance monism and so either “China” was a static, homogeneous entity throughout history, or “China” was a mere aggregate of particulars, and *ipso facto* did not exist at all. The conceptual stumbling block preventing much of the Western academe from understanding the phenomenon of China as a coherence among diversity is the result of a prevailing metaphysics of being, whereby there is either a single order/identity or chaos. Under this dualistic paradigm, the *only* explanation for the longevity of the Chinese tradition is that there was only ever a single order/identity – “Chinese-ness.” The fact that China had existed as an entity throughout millennia *ipso facto* means that it was homogenous. Under this framework, the durability of China was because the “Chinese,” from their inception, shared the property of “Chinese-ness” and did not change through the millennia, or the Chinese imposed Chinese-ness on that which is heterogeneous (i.e. non-Chinese). Stability can *only* be due to homogeneity and unity, whereas heterogeneity is identified with chaos. This substance-monism explanatory paradigm whereby order is due to the shared essence of Chinese-ness is, as we have seen, at odds with the facts of Chinese history itself.

## II. Substance Monism and Autochthony

Further to the orientaling stereotype of China as stagnating in a non-temporal, pre-history before being dragged into “modernity”/historical time/the realm of becoming through its “discovery” by the West, another reason Chinese longevity is explained through substance monism is because it is this substance monism to which the Greek tradition attributed the cause of longevity. The West is interpreting the Chinese historical experience through their own intellectual paradigms. As the classicist Benjamin Isaac has shown in *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, the earliest literatures of the Greek tradition presupposed the importance of autochthony, i.e. substance monism (Isaac 2004: 114; Loraux 1984: 46). “Autochthones” comes from the Ancient Greek *autos* (αὐτός) "self," and *khthon* (χθών) "soil" which literally means "people sprung from earth itself" and refers to the original inhabitants of a country as opposed to settlers as well as their descendants who kept themselves free from an admixture of foreign peoples. The idea of Athenian autochthony, that is a pure descent from the two earth-born kings (Erichthonius/Erechtheus), and thus superiority to all other peoples of the world, is “firmly rooted in the Greek conceptual world” (Isaac 2004: 132) and can be pervasively seen in the literature: in Lysias’s *Epitaphios* 17, Isocrates in *Pangyricus*, the *Iliad* catalogue, Thucydides, Pseudo-Xenophon, Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, Euripides’ *Ion*, Plato in the *Menexenus*. (Isaac 2004: 114-23) and in the Noble lie told in the *Republic*. For Plato in *Laws* 693a one of the disastrous consequences of a defeat with Persia would have been mixed marriages and so the end of a separation between Greek and non-Greek. Aristotle shows the same pervasive Greek concern with the threat to stability that foreign elements pose (Isaac 2004: 120-24). As Isaac writes, “All the relevant fourth-century authors are convinced of the value of pure descent” (Isaac 2004: 130). The Athenian idea of indigeneity was carried over into antiquity and “the view that pure lineage is better than mixed ancestry occurs frequently in the Latin literature” and can be seen in Tacitus, Plutarch and Pompeius Trogus (Isaac 2004: 136, 129).

The substance monism that underlies the Greek idea of autochthony possesses an absolutist character; difference falls into its opposite, non-being. “The metaphysical concept of ‘Being’ (*Sein*)”, as Ernst Cassirer wrote, is marked by this peculiarity that, “it possesses a strongly absolutist character. Within it there is basically no room for ‘Being’ of a different stamp and different *type of meaning*. Rather, we are led sooner or later to a simple ‘either-or’ – to that ‘crisis’ between being and non-being by which the first great thinker of Western metaphysics, Parmenides, already found himself confronted.” (Cassirer 1949: 872) “Being” is inherently dualistic: either identity or non-identity. Inasmuch as life is change, and change into greater diversity, the idea of being, identity, is antithetical to life. Both models for explaining Chinese longevity assume this Greek, substance monism explanation for longevity, i.e. that the reason for China’s endurance is same-ness. Either China was *always* self-identical with itself, or it eradicated what difference it encountered throughout history and put sameness (“Chinese-ness”) in its place. This view of identity is, however, antithetical to the Chinese/Confucians’ own understanding of longevity, which was identified with pluralism. Contra the assumption of sameness manifested in both Western models for

explaining Chinese longevity, it is due to its *very* heterogeneity and thus lack of homogeneous unity, both in theory and in practice, that explains the stability and durability of China. Chinese civilisation, was able “to absorb the ‘barbarian’<sup>5</sup> in its midst” and “by virtue of the ancient ‘melting pot’ that it became from the fourth to the first millennium BCE, gives the impression of having been *always* Chinese” (Cosmo and Wyatt 2003: 2). This seeming paradox (to the Western mind) of China – its simultaneous ethnic diversity and its longevity – is a false one, for it is its very diversity that allows for its longevity. As the critic of colonialism Aimé Césaire said, “whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilisation that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen” (Césaire 2000: 33). It is because Chinese history has heeded a similar idea and replenished itself throughout history with the oxygen of diversity that it has been able to endure. No one better expressed this all-embracing nature of the Chinese historical experience than the New Confucians who explained in their manifesto, “throughout its history, whatever alien cultural elements were acceptable to *Xin* [心] were tolerated and assimilated. It is because of this that Chinese culture was endowed with magnanimity, which is also the root cause of its longevity.”

The pluralism which Confucianism identified with longevity is not, however, a chaos of radical particulars; it is *not* simply the heterogeneity side of the dualism. The cause of longevity is instead coherence among pluralism: harmony. Harmony is an order marked by differentiation and inner multiplicity. We see many examples of this idea of harmony as a diversity that allows for flourishing in the Chinese classics. In “Zheng Yu” 郑语 of the *Records of the Warring States* (国语), Shi Bo (史伯) in conversation with Duke Huan of the state of Zheng explains the importance of harmony – the lack of which led to the decline of the Zhou dynasty. “Harmony [*he*, 和] leads to fecundity [*shengwu*, 生物], identity [*tong*, 同] means barrenness. Things accommodating each other on equal terms [*ping*, 平] is called harmony, and in so doing they are able to flourish and grow, and other things are drawn to them. If identical things [*tong*, 同] are used to supplement identical things then, once they are used up, nothing will remain.” Shi Bo goes on to counsel how the former kings attained the utmost harmony by harmonising the five phases, the five flavours, the four limbs, the six musical notes, the seven orifices, instituting harmony among diversity within social and political institutions, taking consorts from different clans,

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the term “barbarian,” common in a number of European languages, does not have a single analogue in the Chinese language (Bauer 1980, 9; Müller 1980, 46, 56-7, Cosmo 2002: 95). Linguistically, and by implication, conceptually, there was no *dualism* between civilisation and barbarian. The pervasive practice in Western academia of translating Chinese designations of non-Chinese, such as *yidi* (夷狄), as “barbarian,” is another example of reading Western dualisms into the Chinese tradition. On this issue please see Xiang 2019: 7. For an account of the centrality of the barbarian/civilization dualism to Western notions of self-identity from the Greek to the present, please see Robert Williams Jr.’s *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization*.

and allowing for a plurality of different opinions. The passage ends with the injunction, “There is no music in a single note, no refinement/culture-civilisation [*wen*, 文] in a single item, and no taste in a single flavour, no comparison with/reconciliation [*jiang*, 讲] in a single thing.” The practical implication of this conception of harmony is that China, and the Chinese people exemplify this very harmony or coherence among diversity. As we will see in the next section, the best way to understand this concept of harmony is in reference to the organic.

### III. Harmony: The Organic Universal<sup>6</sup>

The West’s (mis)understanding of the Chinese concept of harmony exemplifies its dualistic mode of thought. As Chenyang Li notes, the West has understood harmony as a naïve, passive agreement (Li 2014: 7-8). This “innocent harmony” is contrasted against its more preferable counterpart – “justice” – whereby each person asserts their own rights, even if it leads to continuous conflict. Western philosophy identifies harmony with the identity side of the identity-heterogeneity dichotomy. This, however, is to miss the point about the concept of harmony, as there is no “harmony” within either identity or mere heterogeneity. Harmony means instead finding a coherence which does justice to particularity. In the same way that a dictionary finds a means to order the varieties of words, so does harmony seek to find a means of relating all particulars in a way which not only does not reduce their particularity but allows their particularity to shine more brightly as a result of the relationship that is now created among all the parts. Difference is here understood as enriching, so that without difference, there can be no order; difference is a pre-requisite to order. The relationship between the part and the whole is not just a one-way one whereby the part is an instantiation of the whole/order/universal. The relationship between the particular and the whole/order/universal is a mutual one whereby the parts constitute the order of the whole and the whole creates order out of the parts. Relatedly, the coherence/order between the particulars is not static. As the particulars change, the coherence/order of the whole correspondingly changes. The Confucian view of harmony is not an abstract universal, dualistically imposed onto the particulars themselves; nor, however, is it the chaos of mere particularity. It is instead the mutually interactive relationships that exist between particulars that constitute the universal.

The mutually interactive relationship between particulars that constitutes harmony (coherence among diversity) is “resonance” (*ganying*, 感应). The *Shuowen* defines harmony as “responding to each other [相应也].” The term “ganying” literally means “stimulus-response.” Some of the earliest analogies used in explaining

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of how the concept of the organic exemplifies the concept of harmony from the perspective of the history of Western philosophy please see my recent paper “Organic Harmony and Ernst Cassirer’s Pluralism” *Idealistic Studies*. 49 (3), 2019, 259-284.

harmony were culinary and musical metaphors.<sup>7</sup> The reason why culinary and musical metaphors serve the Chinese idea of harmony so well is that the unity in diversity is not achieved by following a pre-established formula. The particulars responding and mutually complementing each other *is* order. We see this understanding of harmony as mutual responsiveness in *Zhouyu* C (周语下) of the *Guoyu* (国语), in terms of a musical metaphor:

When instruments are played in accordance with their natures there is the utmost music [*yueji*, 乐极]. Bringing such utmost music together is called tones [*sheng*, 声]. When tones mutually respond [*ying*, 应] and promote one another [*xiangbao*, 相保] it is called harmony. When big and small do not mutually trespass, it is called balance [*ping*, 平].

The musical metaphor also serves very well the idea that diverse particulars can be affirmed without redounding to chaos; that order arises from the interaction of the parts, which we also see in *Analects* 2.3:

The Master, speaking with the Grand Music Master of Lu, said, “Music can be understood in this way. The players first in unison [*xi*, 翕], then without constraint [*cong*, 从], playing separately [*chun*, 纯] and clearly [*jiao*, 皦] and then carrying on from one another ceaselessly [*yi*, 绎], and thus the piece reaches perfection.”

The form of music is dynamic, grows out of the interaction of the parts and is not externally imposed. Each instrumental note does not merely assert its own uniqueness, it understands its uniqueness in relation to the uniqueness of other notes, and how its own uniqueness *complements* the uniqueness of other notes.

As A. C. Graham noted, the terms *gan* and *ying* are roughly equivalent to the Western conception of causality. For example, it is the *ganying* of the different musical notes that results in (the form of) “music.” If under a Western model, order is understood as linear causation which presumes that each particular is an inert one which “passively allow themselves to be pushed by ‘causes’” (Graham 1958: 38), under the Chinese model, order arises from the mutual responsiveness (*ganying*, 感应) of the parts. The Western conception of causality that Graham speaks of, whereby each particular is assumed to be inert and identical with each other, and so requires an external, activating *cause* to set them into motion, is dualistic. It is this dualistic understanding of causation that parallels the West’s misunderstanding of Chinese harmony in terms of what Chenyang Li has called “innocent harmony.” In both the Western understanding of (innocent) harmony and causation, order/causation is understood to lie external to the particulars themselves. Under the Western model of order/causation, each particular is assumed to be inert prior to activation by a cause,

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<sup>7</sup> The “Shaogong 20<sup>th</sup> year” chapter of the *Zuozhuan* contains a discussion about harmony in terms balancing different flavors.

as such, order/form lies *not* in the particulars themselves, but in the activating cause. As each particular is assumed to be inert, they are also assumed to be identical, so that the cause acts in a predictable, linear way. The Western model of order/causation is characterized by (1) inert, identical particulars, (2) an external cause that is applied to the particulars, (3) a linear, predictable outcome/order in causation. In the Chinese conception of causality that Graham alludes to, however, each particular is *ziran* 自然 /*sponte sua* (as opposed to inert and identical). The Chinese conception of causality does not assume that each particular is inert and so causes are linear and predictable. Under the Chinese model, it is assumed that all particulars are active; they are *ziran*, they *already* contain order/form within themselves. As such, under this conception of influence, order is understood as the coherence which emerges from the interaction of the parts. Order is not external to the particulars themselves but arises as a result of the particulars interacting with each other. Under the Chinese conception of causality (*ganying* 感应), (1) each particular is dynamic and acts spontaneously, (2) order is not externally imposed, but arises from the mutual interaction of the parts, (3) order/causation is not linear and predictable.

The non-dualism and coherence among diversity that characterises the concept of harmony is best understood in analogy with the organic. An organism, for example, maintains coherence out of a heterogeneity of parts. Similarly, an ecosystem also exemplifies this coherence among diversity; the many different organisms in an ecosystem does not mean there is not an overall coherence. Because the parts of an organism are constantly changing (through exchange with its environment), the whole changes in correspondence with changes in the parts. In our own bodies, there is a great diversity of different parts and the substance that makes up who we are is continuously being replaced. We are not physically the same selves as we were when we were a baby, but this does not mean that there is not a coherent order: the 80-year-old self will identify with the 1-year-old self. In fact, it is only *because* the self never stopped changing (i.e. our bodies never stopped changing physically) that one is able to live at all; as an organism, the human being is an “open system.” The self is not a *thing*; the self is a *process* of maintaining equilibrium/harmony with the environment. As the process philosopher of biology John Dupré writes, “It is an elementary fact of physics that maintaining such a system will require constant interaction with, and intake of matter or energy from, the environment. Its persistence is actively maintained rather than just given. Stasis, for an organism, is death.” (Dupré 2017: 2)

Persistence or harmony/equilibrium “is something that the organism achieves, not some property or properties that it continues to possess” (Dupré 2017: 2). As Shi Bo said, “Harmony [*he*, 和] leads to fecundity [*shengwu*, 生物], identity [*tong*, 同] means barrenness.” Similarly, as Hans Jonas wrote in *The Phenomenon of Life*, organic life is characterized by metabolism, that is, “exchange of matter with the surroundings.” This means that the organism is “never the same materially and yet persists as its same self, by not remaining the same matter. Once it really becomes the same with the sameness of its material contents – if any two ‘time slices’ of it become, as to their individual contents, identical with each other and with the slices between them – it ceases to live; it dies” (Jonas 2001: 76).

In the living thing, there is no persistent core that stands apart from the metabolizing activity (the exchange of matter between the organism and the environment). It is important to stress that there is *not* some eternal form that persists behind all the processes of material change. “The exchange of matter with the environment is not a peripheral activity engaged in by a persistent core: it is the total mode of continuity (self-continuation) of the subject of life itself” (Jonas 2001: 76, footnote 13). The organism is “wholly and continuously a result of its metabolizing activity, and further that none of the ‘result’ ceases to be an object of metabolism while it is also an agent of it” (Jonas 2001: 76, footnote 13). The organic order is one that continuously creates harmony out of diversity, order out of plurality. It is only when there is diversity within a manifold that we talk about harmony. If the manifold was homogenous, then we speak merely of identity – the characteristic of Being.

The relationship between the part and the “whole” under the model of the “organic universal” is one where each part is internally driven but requires for its completion the other parts of the whole. The “whole” is understood as the *functional* law derived from the spontaneous arising of novelty due to the interaction of the parts. The effect of this *ziran* metaphysics is that *harmony* becomes a key concept. Once one assumes that particulars already have form and are dynamic (because they are ceaselessly changing) – i.e. they are *ziran* – then order cannot be understood as something static and linear. Order is instead understood as emergent from the radically heterogeneous particulars acting on their own terms but *cooperating* and *responding* to each other, and so dynamic. In an organicist paradigm heterogeneous particulars can co-exist without threatening the overarching coherence. What is harmonious comes from a dynamic mutual relationship between the diverse particulars and needs to be constantly re-achieved. The Confucian view of harmony is well expressed by the critic of Western colonialism, Aimé Césaire, when he writes of his non-dualistic conception of the universal as formed through the complementary relationship between all particulars:

I’m not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the ‘universal.’ My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars (Césaire 2010: 152).

Similarly, the Confucian conception of order (the universal) is understood to arise through the mutual responsiveness (*ganying*, 感应) or resonance of all things with each other, so that, in Césaire’s words, there is a deepening of all particulars. This mutual responsiveness and co-existence between all particulars *is* the Chinese conception of “harmony.” Order *is* the mutual complementarity between all things and is understood as dynamic and evolving. It is this understanding of order as a coherence which is created out of diversity that explains why Chinese identity is both coherent and heterogeneous and why it maintains identity through time despite constant historical changes. It is this paradigm of organic harmony that defuses the

paradox that has long perplexed sinologists of how “the distinctions” that exist “among different groups of the Han may well be defined as ethnic ones” (Pines 2009: 223, footnote 4), but these differences, “as deep as they may be, never seem to threaten the dominant notion of a fundamental unity” (Cosmo and Wyatt 2003: 2). Similarly, as Tingyang Zhao has noted, “The flexibility of the recomposition has made the concept of China take on certain ‘biological’ characteristics” (Zhao 2019: 33). The fundamental unity exists not *despite* heterogeneity, but due to heterogeneity: it is a coherence among diversity.

#### IV. The Harmony Model in Chinese History

The failure to understand the nature of the Chinese philosophy of harmony has resulted in gross misinterpretations of Chinese history. As we saw in sections 2 and 3, the Western explanation for longevity is through a dualism that puts a premium on the identity side of the dualism. It is for this reason that there are so many Western scholars who tend to assume that the reason for the longevity of China as a political and cultural entity was *also* because of the identity side of the dualism. Frank Dikötter’s *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, which attempted to prove the existence of race-consciousness in pre-modern and modern China, displays these same dualistic assumptions. As evidence for a dichotomous relationship between the barbarian and the “Chinese,” Frank Dikötter points us to what he calls, a “cosmographical plan” (Dikötter 1992: 4). The “Cosmographical plan” that Dikötter is referencing is found in the *Book of Documents*. Although similar “plans” can also be found in the *Zhouli* (周礼) and *Erya* (尔雅):

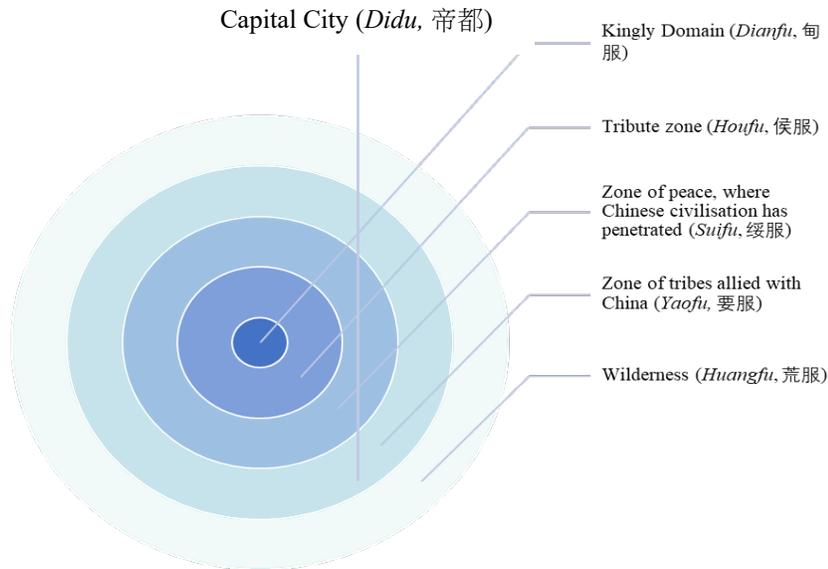
One hundred *li*<sup>8</sup> from the Kingly Domain [*dianfu*], people should give all their crops to the king. Two hundred *li* from the Kingly Domain, people should give the ears of the grain to the king. Three hundred *li* from the Kingly Domain people should take beard off the crop and give it to the King. Four hundred *li* from the Kingly Domain people should give chestnuts. Five hundred *li* from the Kingly domain people should give rice. Five hundred *li* from the Kingly Domain is the Tribute Zone [*Houfu*], one hundred *li* within this, people should perform different labours, two hundred *li* within this, people should perform stipulated labours, three hundred *li* within this, people should take on defence duties. Five hundred *li* from the Tribute Zone is the Zone of Peace [*Suifu*] where within three hundred *li* one should appoint governors to implement education [文教]. Beyond the three hundred *li*, people should familiarise themselves with defence and protect the king. Five hundred *li* from the Zone of Peace is the Zone of tribes allied with China [*Yaofu*]. Within three hundred *li* of this people should observe the same regulations as in the domains already stipulated. Beyond this three hundred *li*, the taxes/tributes

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<sup>8</sup> One *li* (里) is circa 500 meters.

levied can be lessened [夷]<sup>9</sup>. Five Hundred *li* from the Zone of tribes allied with China is the Wilderness [*Huangfu*]. Within three hundred *li*, people can be lax [蛮]<sup>10</sup> with regard to the various regulations, beyond the three hundred *li*, the area can be used for settling criminals. (My translation, based on Müller 1980: 54)

A visual representation of this “five-zone theory” looks like this:



<sup>9</sup> In translating this word, I have followed my edition of the *Shangshu* which follows Kong Anguo (孔安國) (?-408CE) and Kong Yingda (孔穎達) (574-648) who comments that, “Observe the standard teachings, serve the king is all [that is necessary].” (*Shangshu Zhengyi* 1999: 169) [守平常之教，事王者而已] Ma Rong (79-166CE) (马融) writes, “Yi (夷) is the changeable.” [夷，易也] (*Shangshu Zhengyi* 1999: 1769)

<sup>10</sup> In translating this word, I have followed my edition of the *Shangshu* which follows Wang Su’s (王肅) (195-256CE) and Ma Rong’s commentary in translating this word as “lax.” [蛮，慢也，礼简怠慢] (*Shangshu Zhengyi* 1999: 170) Zheng Xuan (127-200CE) uses *man* (蛮) in the sense of a designation of a people, but he writes that one should follow their customs” [郑玄：“蛮者，听从其俗”] (*Shangshu Zhengyi* 1999: 169) and that one should institute cultured learning in the sense of *Analects* 16.1, “if those who are distant will not submit, simply refine your culture and Virtue in order to attract them. Once you have attracted them you should make them content.” (Slingerland 2003: 192) [故远人不服，则修文德以来之。既来之，则安之] One should not rule them as one does in “China” itself – i.e. forcing them through laws. [不制以国内之法强逼之] (*Shangshu Zhengyi* 1999: 170)

The problem with Dikötter's description of this "five-zone theory" as a cosmography is that cosmography implies Aquinas' great chain of being, the medieval harmony of the spheres and the Ptolemaic model of the universe, in which the order of things is fixed like physical laws. Like the dualistic conception of causality above, order is dualistically imposed on the particulars themselves. The inaccuracy of using the paradigm of "cosmography" in relation to the Chinese "five zones" is that the boundaries of between these zones are not determinate:

As scholars generally agree, the Five-zone theory, basically and in realistic terms, described no more than a *relative* dichotomy between the inner and the outer areas. China was the inner region relative to the outer region of the barbarians, just as the royal domain was, *relative* to the outer lords' zone, an inner zone, and the controlled zone became the inner relative to the wild zone on the periphery of Chinese civilization. (Yü 1986: 381-82, my emphasis)

The plan is not a "cosmography," because the boundaries are dynamic and shifting (Lattimore 1951: 276). The individual areas were thus never completely separate, but they intermeshed and influenced each other without losing their specific character (Bauer 1980: 13). In actual practice, the tribute system (which the five-zone theory describes) was constantly altered according to the different relations with foreign political entities.

Of course, the terms *wai* and *nei* (external and internal) might be used in a relative sense. Thus, one could talk about the inner-inner, the outer-outer, and so forth. Some of the outer areas might be absorbed into the inner as a result of military or cultural expansion. Potentially, all "foreigners" (*chu-fan*) could become "outer feudatories" (*wai-fan*). Or, in more general terms, all "uncivilized barbarian" (*sheng-fan*) could be "civilized" barbarians (*shu-fan*). (Yang 1968: 21)

We can see this, for example, in the Han's changing relations with the Xiong-nu (Yü 1986: 394-98). In the chapter "Biography of the Eastern Yi" (东夷列传) of the *Book of Later Han*, it is said, "The Qin annexed the six states, the Huai Yi (淮夷) tribes and Si Yi (泗夷) tribes were all dispersed and became normal citizens [民户]." Like the *organic* conception of cause/order, changes in the particular lead to changes in the whole and order is not externally imposed; order arises (dynamically) from the interaction of the parts themselves. My parsing this five-zone plan in terms of an organic model bears some similarity with Hall and Ames' interpretation of this five zone theory as "a focus/field distinction that defines the relative focus of an 'inner-outer (*nei-wai* 内外)' circle" (Hall and Ames 1995: 242):

This radial solar system seems to be a signature of the Chinese world order. It is a centripetal order articulated outward from a central axis through patterns of deference. These concrete patterns "con-tribute" in varying degrees and are themselves constitutive of the authority at the center. They shape and bring into focus the standards and values of the social and political entity. This determinate, detailed, center-seeking focus fades into an increasingly indeterminate and untextured field. The magnetic attraction of the center is such that, with varying

degrees of success, it draws into its field and suspends the disparate, diverse, and often mutually inconsistent centers that constitute its world. (Hall and Ames 1995: 243)

The centripetal order<sup>11</sup> that is in a part-whole, two-way relationship with the periphery which Hall and Ames describe *is* what I describe through the paradigm of organic harmony. The centre (order/the universal/whole) does not externally impose order on the particulars (which are assumed to be identical), the interactions among the (diverse) particulars themselves *constitute* the centre. The centre is thus *not* a static form that seeks to impose itself onto the particulars, as in the Western model of causation that was described in the previous section, but a process of harmonization. A more accurate way to read this five-zone theory is *not* in terms of the dualistic, Western paradigm of geographical determinism, but in terms of the polar star model of the virtuous that Confucius spoke of in *Analects* 2.1, which Ames has characterised as “centripetal harmony” (Ames 1993: 48). This middle is a centre which harmonises the whole. The German sinologist Wolfgang Leander Bauer (1930-1997) has also noticed the organic and harmonious paradigm in the Chinese model of assimilation:

This “middle”, however, was not considered to be encircled as a ring, but rather as the center of a living, pulsating stream pouring outwards, which had to be kept free of all isolation in order to develop fully. On the other hand, the “middle” was also shaped by peripheral areas diametrically opposed to each other in their extremes; in it, these hostile opposites did not simply sublate [*aufgehoben*] but reached a harmonious development. (Bauer 1980: 7-8)

The center is thus not a static *arché* which imposes itself on difference, in a unilinear fashion, but an organic one which requires change and diversity. The Chinese civilizational centre does not remain the same by merely makes those that it draws into its orbit identical to itself, in the process of exchange, the center itself changes. There is, to an extent, a reciprocal exchange of identities between the center and the margin. Jacques Gernet similarly writes,

These contacts between the Chinese and the aborigines resulted in many cultural borrowings, the extent of which is still not very well known; it seems to have been considerable. (Gernet 1982: 175)

Indeed, the “Chinese” peoples have become enriched by absorbed “foreign” elements (Gernet 1982: 12). The centre is not a static, extra-temporal principle, an *arché*, that becomes corrupt through any deviation from its original state: it is an *organism* that changes through time. This organic-harmony model is the reason behind the

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<sup>11</sup> Hall and Ames’s concept of centripetal order bears similarities with Tingyang Zhao’s concept of a “whirlpool state pattern.” (Zhao 2019: 23)

phenomenon of “diversity in one body” (多元一体) that Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) famously characterised China as.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of how China exemplifies the organic-harmony model of “diversity in one body” is that many of the founders of dynasties considered to be “Chinese” were “foreign.” Throughout Chinese history, it was common knowledge that the Zhou royal house was descended from the Rong “barbarians,”<sup>13</sup> so much so that intermarriage with one of the Rong tribes constituted incest (Creel 1970: 196). Mencius (4B29) talks of King Wen, the founder of the Zhou dynasty, as a man of the Western Yi (西夷). Following the Zhou dynasty, the Qin royal house was also widely known to be Rong in origin. Similarly, that the imperial clan which ruled during the Tang dynasty were genealogically connected to the Tuoba and other non - “Chinese” families, was an open secret (Chen 2012: 5). The Northern and Southern Dynasties of the Western Wei, Eastern Wei, Northern Zhou, Northern Qi and the later Sui, Tang, Liao, Western Liao, Jin, Yuan and Qing Dynasties were all “foreign” in origin. This was no impediment, however, to their being seen as “Chinese” today.

The land which the Zhou Dynasty ruled over was itself one of diverse peoples and the Zhou project was one of welding them into a political and cultural whole (Creel 1970: 204). During the Zhou dynasty, the southern kingdoms of Wu (吴), Yue (越) and Chu (楚) had very different cultures to the “principalities of the centre” based around the Yellow River region (Gernet 1982: 60). Speaking about the formation of “Chinese” identity in the Spring and Autumn period, Herrlee G. Creel writes:

It seems quite clear that when the fabric of early Chinese history was elaborated, [...], the reputed progenitors of a very large number of groups were worked into the tapestry. [...] it was not constructed by any one person, or with conscious guile. No rich tradition ever is. But in China, where tradition and family and long association have been of the highest importance, this interweaving of genealogies produced a united people with a sense of solidarity that could, perhaps, have been brought about in no other way. (Creel 1970: 225)

Similarly, what Roger Ames writes about the Han synthesis could equally apply to the rest of Chinese history:

This political order [of the Han] was one in which all of the diversity and difference characteristic of the multiple, competing centers of the Warring States period was drawn up and suspended in the harmony of the Han dynasty. (Ames 1993: 64-65; Hall and Ames 1995: 243)

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *The Pattern of Diversity in Unity of the Chinese Nation* 《中国民族多元一体格局》 edited by 费孝通.

<sup>13</sup> I personally think the German term *Randvölker* or “outer tribes” is more apt a translation than “barbarian” in the Chinese context.

In early China, one of the most striking illustrations of how the “Chinese” identity is a fusion of diverse peoples, cultures and traditions is the example of how the state of Chu (楚) was assimilated into the Chinese identity. The Chu kingdom was a vast territory inhabited by aboriginal tribes and a language which belonged to a different linguistic group to Chinese. (Gernet 1982: 60) The cultural difference between Chu and the northern states is evident from its literary culture. There is a marked difference in style, for example, between the *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*, 楚辞) to those of the *Book of Songs*. The differences between Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi* with its northern counterparts such as the *Analects* are also appreciable. The fact that we today consider these texts “Chinese” is a testament to the process of amalgamation which wove these various strands together into a coherent identity. It would be a mistake to think that the process of creating a united whole is a one-way process of making the assimilated the same as the assimilator. In the case of Chu, the Chu government appeared to be more advanced than its northern counterparts and so in the eventual amalgamation, “it seemed likely that Ch’u [Chu] contributed quite as much as it received” (Creel 1970: 219). The Chu, however, also admired central states culture. High officers from Chu quoted from the *Odes* and *Documents* and cited King Wen and Wu as exemplars (Creel 1970: 220). The great king of Chu, Xiang Yu (项羽) (232–202 BC), has himself long become part of the Chinese imagination and a fixture of Chinese lore. After the fall of the Qin dynasty, Xiang Yu and Liu Bang (founder of the Han dynasty) fought to succeed the Qin as hegemon of China. At the Battle of Gaixia (202 BC) Xiang Yu lost to Liu Bang’s armies, and with a few of his army of 8,000 men remaining, retreated to the bank of the Wu River. Despite entreaties, Xiang Yu refused to cross the river back to the safety of his own state, as he was ashamed to return home and face his people. Instead, Xiang Yu made a last stand and died in battle. In 1127, when the Northern Song dynasty was about to collapse due to the invasion of the Jin armies (金), the great poet Li Qingzhao (李清照), in frustration at her husband’s cowardice in the face of invasion, wrote a paean to Xiang Yu’s courage:

In life, [one] should be outstanding among men,  
 In death [one] should also be a hero among ghosts  
 Even today [I] think of Xiang Yu  
 Who refused to cross east of the river.

The same process of that has assimilated Xiang Yu into tapestry of Chinese history is what has produced the “Chinese” people.

A third example of this organic-harmony model as what created the “Chinese” people is the “Chinese” encounter with its southern neighbours in what is contemporary Yunnan throughout history. Migration between the north and the south led to encounters between the very different cultures of the north and south; encounters which led to hybridization and the “Chinese identity.” The conflict with the Nanzhao meant that from as early as the Western Han, military peoples moved south. Scholars have estimated that in sixteenth century Yunnan, the Han population was over 2 million and was around a third of the total population (Lee 1982: 715).

The southern cultures, in crucial respects, contrasted sharply with that of Han Chinese culture. As a historian of Yunnan puts it, “These social customs, especially the status of women, reveal the fact that Yunnan in general was more Southeast Asian than Chinese” (Yang 2008: 5, 10). *Brief Accounts of Yunnan (Yunnan Zhilue 云南志略)* compiled by Li Jing (李京) in the first decade of the fourteenth century gives first-hand observations of the indigenous groups and culture of Yunnan. From Li’s records we can see that many native customs contrasted sharply with those of the Chinese. The Bai women (including widows) freely have sex with men. The Jinchi Baiyi women farmed instead of the men, virginity was not important, was even a barrier to marriage, and the women freely had sex with the men. If a girl died before marriage all the men who had relations with her would hold up banners to see her off, and if the total number of banners exceeded 100, she was considered especially beautiful (Yang 2008: 5, 5). Even when married, the Moxie women freely had sex with other men (Yang 2008: 5, 6). Before marriage, the Luoluo women first had relations with the shaman. The Luoluo and Moxie women also held prominent political roles (Yang 2008: 5, 7). These differences, however, over time reached a harmonious development so that “By the late Ming period, a hybrid, plural cultural system had evolved, inaugurating the use of Yunnannese (*yunnanren*).”<sup>14</sup>

Dikötter’s idea of a cosmographical plan – a *geographical determinism* (whereby geography determines civilization) – is, in fact, an *idée fixe* throughout Western history (but not Chinese history). Under the cosmographical plan that Dikötter is alluding to, there is a determinate order to the world; order does not, as in the Chinese organic-harmony model, arise from the interaction of the parts but is instead pre-determined. This cosmographical plan is operative under Aristotle’s account that the further away from Greece one goes, the more likely it is that one encounters peoples who lack rationality and live by perception alone, like non-human animals (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a 9-11). Dikötter’s idea of a cosmographical plan thus assumes this *idée fixe* in the history of Western thought: the dualism between civilisation and barbarism. Aristotle, in fact, was only repeating received wisdom. Herodotus himself explicitly states throughout the *Histories*, that one of its central themes was that the farther away one moved from Greece, the stranger the countries and peoples encountered. The crucial point is that the *Histories* is not presenting figures of one’s imagination as in the *Shanhaijing*, but actual non-Greek peoples such as the Babylonians, Massagetae, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Indians, Scythians, Libyans, and Thracians. This is why, from the time of the Roman Empire, one sees an obsession with the idea that emigration away from Rome leads to deterioration (Isaac 2004: 308). It is for the same reason that soon as Columbus landed on the American continent in 1492, he forthwith made inquiries about the Amazons and giants which Pierre d’Ailly had led him to believe he was to find in the southern latitudes (Pagden 1982: 81). This geographical determinism, whereby an external, static order determines the natures of each particular thing betrays Western assumptions about

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<sup>14</sup> For an account of the “indigenization” process please see Yang 2008: 5, 74-107.

order. The “great chain of being” account of order is simply not the Chinese understanding of order.

### Conclusion

The metaphysics which underlies the concept of harmony is best understood through an *organic* paradigm in which the whole is not a *thing* but the coherence and responsiveness between the parts and between the parts with the whole. This conception of the (functional) whole means that the whole is not existentially threatened by change. We can see this paradigm of harmony in Chinese history itself. Despite constant changes to its landmass, peoples and cultures throughout the millennia, Chinese *identity* was constant. The Chinese conception of harmony, it was argued, means a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars. Order emerges from the reciprocity between the particulars (that constitute the whole). The Chinese concept of harmony thus overcomes the dualism between identity and heterogeneity.

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