

Thucydides Trap vs Ghengis Khan: Western Hubris or How Harvard fails to read history

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Graham Allison in a talk about his book 'Destined for war' (Note 1) on 24 April 2018 (Note 2) stated at 8.55 that Thucydides was 'the father and founder of 'history''. This is an extraordinarily arrogant and chauvinist statement to make on Chinese soil where the memory of Sima Qian (Records of the Grand Historian)(Notes 3 + 4) is alive and well. But it cannot merely be a typographic error that makes Thucydides the father of not merely Western History but 'history' for even in Western terms the 'father of history' is a phrase usually referring to Herodotus. But the key error here is not to take into account other histories and the rise of Ghengis Khan cannot be seen as merely incidentally relevant. Here a new empire arose at astonishing speed and so the direct relevance is clear.

Allison seeks to force China into Western history as if that was the only history there could be. All 16 of Allison's examples come from Western European history. Even as a heuristic device it surely would be better to find equivalences in Chinese history but that would not serve Harvard's or the US 'amour propre'.

More telling pieces of history are the stories of kingdoms of Jurched and Khwarizm.

Jurched

The Jurched had become accustomed to leaders of steppe clans paying obedience to them and, concerned that Ghengis Khan was growing too mighty, demanded that he show submission to their Golden Khan. When the Jurched heard of Khan's preparation for battle they responded: "Our empire is like the sea; yours is but a handful of sand. How can we fear you?" In the Jurched campaign after many successes and to avoid further bloodshed Ghengis Khan came to a settlement with the Golden Khan of the Jurched and took a royal princess as a wife. But almost immediately after the agreement the Golden Khan fled, moving his capital to a place beyond the reach, he hoped, of Ghengis Khan. Enraged, Ghengis Khan returned to battle and had the capital looted and razed. (Note 5)

Khwarizm:

"In 1219, with many military and commercial accomplishments behind him, Genghis Khan neared sixty years of age. As Juvaini describes, "He had brought about complete peace and quiet, and security and tranquillity, and had achieved the extreme of prosperity and well-being; the roads were secure and disturbances allayed." He seemed content to live out his days in peace, to enjoy his family and horses, and to bask in the new prosperity he had brought to his people. He had far more goods now than he could possibly use or distribute to his people, and he wanted to

use this vast amount of new resources to stimulate trade. In addition to the thriving supply of traditional Asian goods, other commodities sometimes trickled in from the more distant and exotic western lands of the Middle East. The Muslims in that part of the world produced the finest of all metals, the magnificent gleaming steel. They had cottons and other fine textiles, and they knew the mysterious process of making glass. The vast area from the mountains of modern Afghanistan to the Black Sea fell under the power of the Turkic sultan Muhammad II, whose empire was called Khwarizm. Genghis Khan wanted these exotic commodities, and toward this end he sought a trading partnership with the distant sultan. The French historian Pétis explained Genghis Khan's situation at the time: ". . . this Emperor having nothing more to fear either from the East, West, or Northern Parts of Asia, endeavour'd to cultivate a sincere Friendship with the King of Carizme. He therefore toward the latter end of this Year 1217 sent three Ambassadors to him with Presents . . . to ask . . . that their People might trade together with Safety, and find in a perfect Union with one another, that Repose and Plenty which are the chief Blessings that can be wished for in all Kingdoms." To negotiate a trade treaty and formalize their commercial relations, Genghis Khan sent an envoy to the sultan of Khwarizm: "I have the greatest desire to live in peace with you. I shall look on you as my son. For your part, you are not unaware that I have conquered North China and subjected all the tribes of the north. You know that my country is an ant heap of warriors, a mine of silver, and that I have no need to covet other dominions. We have an equal interest in fostering trade between our subjects." With some suspicion and reluctance, the sultan agreed to the treaty. Since the Mongols themselves were not merchants, Genghis Khan turned to the Muslim and Hindu merchants already operating in his newly acquired territories of the Uighur; from among them, he assembled 450 merchants and retainers whom he sent from Mongolia to Khwarizm with a caravan loaded with the luxury commodities of white camel cloth, Chinese silk, silver bars, and raw jade. He sent an Indian at the head of the delegation with another message of friendship to the sultan, inviting trade so that "henceforth the abscess of evil thoughts may be lanced by the improvement of relations and agreement between us, and the pus of sedition and rebellion removed." When the caravan entered Khwarizm in the northwestern province of Otrar, now located in southern Kazakhstan, the arrogant and greedy governor seized the goods and killed the merchants and their drivers. He had no idea what a grievous response would follow. As the Persian observer Juvaini explained, the governor's attack not only wiped out a caravan, it "laid waste a whole world." (Note 5)

Taoist view:

What are the key lessons from these episodes? Here I present a Taoist analysis: The incumbent acted with arrogance and disdain and provoked contemptuously the wrath of Ghengis Khan. They relied on their military superiority based on material analysis i.e their armies were significantly greater in multiples than that of Ghengis Khan (Khwarizm had an army 4 times the size of Ghengis Khan's) and they were fighting on their home terrain. Ghengis Khan relied on justice and the will of heaven. (note 6). His belief was that the same spirit that had protected his rise to fortune would continue to protect him as long as he behaved in accordance with divine justice and the will of Heaven. In the words of the great Taoist, Sun Tzu

‘The art of war is governed by five constant factors.....1) the moral law...

The moral law causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger...

Therefore, in your deliberations, when seeking to determine the military conditions, let them be made the basis of a comparison, in this wise: which of the two sovereigns is imbued with the moral law’ (Note 7)

Looked at with these lens, Taoist lens, the current situation reveals a US President backed by Congress who breaks treaties, acts unilaterally, seeks only his own and his countries’s sole interest. This is a President and a Congress that gives to the rich and takes away from the poor, that openly encourages devastation in foreign countries where its fundamental interest are not at stake, and disregards the welfare of the planet. Ghengis Khan is quoted as saying ‘..if you can’t swallow your pride, you can’t lead ... It will be easy to forget your vision and purpose once you have fine clothes, fast horses, and beautiful women....(In that case) ..you will be no better than a slave, and you will surely lose everything.’”(Note 5).

This above is where a Taoist view might be. However in accordance with an earlier suggestion that one should present history from multiple points of view one should also look at the current US condition from Western viewpoints to see if the same conclusions could arise from within that tradition.

As Thucydides originally put it:

“Old stories of occurrences handed down by tradition, but scantily confirmed by experience, suddenly ceased to be incredible; there were earthquakes of unparalleled extent and violence; eclipses of the sun occurred with a frequency unrecorded in previous history; there were great droughts in sundry places and consequent famines, and that most calamitous and awfully fatal visitation, the plague. All this came upon them with the late war, which was begun by the Athenians and Peloponnesians by the dissolution of the thirty years' truce made after the conquest of Euboea. ” Note 8. Even Thucydides appealed to cosmic forces.

Clearly the stakes are great and Graham Allison’s motivation cannot be clearer - how to save the world and prevent war.

EVANGELICALS

How can we see the current situation through evangelical eyes? The implicit idea that the future kingdom of God can be translated into secular terms as the emergence of democracy and human rights as conceived in the West is of course entirely blasphemous. But that is what we have and it was effectively expressed in the overtly millenarian terms of the ‘End of History’. These secular evangelicals seek to bring about God’s kingdom of democracy and human rights on earth by

main force if necessary and challenge disbelievers as heretics who do not serve the gods of democracy and human rights and who should be dealt with as agents of the devil - literally 'axis of evil' or 'triangles of evil'. Such actions can only bring about divine wrath and rejection.

HUBRIS

How can we restate this in terms of Western tradition of cultural analysis? To restate the argument in terms of Greek tragedy: what is being shown here is hubris on a colossal scale... not merely of Trump, but of the entire American establishment. The hubris that American exceptionalism guarantees the rightness of any self interested act of the US, the idea that the cycles of history came to an end and no new cycle can ever arise. We all know the consequences of hubris.

Allison misquotes Santayana as saying only those who do not read history are condemned to repeat it. (Note 9) But could Santayana really have meant only Western history as taught at Harvard?

CONCLUSIONS:

What is being argued in this paper is that the most important and most dangerous factor in the current situation is the cumulative self deception that is the American establishment self understanding. It is easy to see and distinguish the extremes but the 'center' is itself an extreme distortion. When the main sources of enlightened thinking can be so thoroughly in-bred into narrow visions that they cannot see themselves and their parochialism for what it is then that constitutes the greatest danger to world peace. In their 'bubble' it will not be possible for others to speak to them. In their claims to be 'secular' they embody deep religious based theology of elect and predestined which wrapped up into an epicurean silk wrapper sounds reasonable but gives no space for clear dissent. For to say the Taoist view of the importance of 'moral law' is hookey non sense and in the next breath insist on the importance of spreading democracy and human rights is calamitous folly. When a US professor can ask his audience to learn about Thucydides but not consider learning about 'The Three Kingdoms', when he can ask his adult audience like school children 'to repeat after me' and not see himself for the ridiculous figure he presents..... this is the real danger to world peace, as simple acts by China which in their terms are peaceful may be construed in a ridiculous manner and the options available to China without seriously running foul of their own values and beliefs may be limited. Of course the Chinese leadership will be keenly interested in Graham Allison's book as it reveals how the US thinks but where the US does not bother to adjust and accept that there are non Western histories every bit as powerful, and equally worth learning from, then the scope for disaster is great. It is not in the power of China to open the eyes of Americans to their own folly of self deception. Any attempt of the Chinese to say this would be quickly interpreted as self interested and full of obscurantism. This makes US self deception self perpetuating and highly dangerous. For when one side cannot hear the other .. anything can happen.

NOTES

1. “Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides trap?” by Graham Allison 2017 Scribe
2. see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPoXwD_Jj8&t=869s
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Records_of_the_Grand_Historian
4. ‘Records of the Grand Historian’ Sima Qian, Columbia University Press
5. ‘Ghengis Khan and the making of the modern world’ by Jack Weatherford, Penguin 2004, ch.4,
6. According to records he prayed for 4 days and had his people pray also for divine guidance see Weatherford op cit.
7. ‘The Art of War’ by Sun Tzu chapter 1 Lionel Giles trs
8. Excerpt From: Thucydides. “The History of the Peloponnesian War”. Apple Books.
9. The correct quote is ‘ **Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.**’
https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George_Santayana