

“Reverse Orientalism and the Reception of Confucius in the West”
[« L’orientalisme inversé et l’accueil de Confucius dans l’ouest »]

(In English, with English-French bilingual slides)

This talk employs the historical reception of Confucius by European intellectuals as a starting point for a discussion of a recent trend in the Western study of Chinese thought, “reverse Orientalism”: classically Orientalist in content, but “reverse” in the sense that the normative valuation is flipped from negative to positive. Chinese holism is positively contrasted with alienated Western dualism; Chinese collectivism is held up as an antidote to the fragmented anomie of modern Western life. The talk will argue that, while there is a kernel of truth to all of these claims, in their extreme form they obscure, rather than illuminate, both our view of early Chinese thought and the potential contribution it can make to contemporary debates.

This talk will endeavor to debunk one myth in particular—the claim that the “holistic” early Chinese lack any sense of mind-body dualism—by focusing not only on archeological and textual evidence, but also on relevant evidence from cognitive science. An overwhelming body of empirical evidence suggests that some form of “sloppy” mind-body folk dualism is a human cognitive universal, which radically shifts the burden of proof for those who would argue that the early Chinese lacked such a concept. Combined with the sorts of evidence long available to humanists, work in cognitive science can decisively tilt the balance when it comes to adjudicating between competing interpretations of a text or of a tradition.

The talk will conclude by suggesting that both classic and reverse Orientalism are symptoms of a deeper problem in the humanities: a fixation with linguistic or social constructivism, and a corresponding tendency to assume radical cultural difference as an interpretative starting point. It will argue that a model of human beings as evolved, embodied biological-cultural entities—rather than products of cultural discourse or disembodied rationality—is a much more empirically plausible view, and moreover one that allows us to see how the human body and embodied experience can serve as a bridge to the cultural “Other.” Adopting a consilient approach to the study of human culture can help us get beyond unhelpful cultural essentialism and caricatures of both our own and other cultures, and also serve to integrate humanistic work into a set of broader interdisciplinary conversations.