

# polylog 50<sup>2023</sup>

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR INTERKULTURELLES PHILOSOPHIEREN

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## Epistemische Gewalt

Mit Beiträgen von Claudia Brunner, Moira Pérez, Divya Dwivedi, Manuel Rivera Espinoza,  
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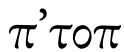
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MANUEL RIVERA ESPINOZA

# Questioning the Truism of Fractured Experience

On the Neo-Orientalist features of Michael Puett's reading of early China

## ABSTRACT

The paper begins by revisiting the ongoing debate surrounding Orientalism in early Chinese studies, with a specific focus on the allegations of essentialism and Orientalism leveled against Roger Ames by Michael Puett and Paul Goldin, respectively. Upon a thorough examination of Edward Said's work, it becomes evident that these accusations lack a solid foundation. Furthermore, Puett's interpretation of ancient Chinese texts as illustrating »fractured experience« may itself exhibit neo-Orientalist features. This perspective gains support through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's concept of »epistemic violence« and Edgardo Lander's exploration of the »coloniality of knowledge.« By way of conclusion, the paper proposes that Boaventura de Sousa Santos' ideas may offer a way to escape the Orientalist paradigm and acknowledge non-Western, particularly early Chinese, forms of knowledge and experience.

## KEYWORDS

china,  
orientalism,  
epistemic violence,  
coloniality of knowledge

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in: polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles  
Philosophieren 50/2023, Seite 37–53

## INTRODUCTION:

THE DEBATE CONCERNING ORIENTALISM  
IN SINOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Although both postcolonial and Chinese studies deal with the non-Western, and more specifically the Asian, as an object of knowledge, the interaction between them has been, up to date, rather tenuous, if not borderline non-existent. Besides the occasional invocation of the concept of »Orientalism«, scholars working in the field of Chinese studies have not made an effort to significantly engage with the work of, for example, Edward Said, who originally coined the term »Orientalism«. Vice versa, scholars working in the fields of postcolonial or decolonial studies have not endeavored to engage with the work of, for example, Roger Ames, despite the striking similarities in terms of their ultimate ends. The current article, in line with the aims of this special issue, is designed as a preliminary attempt to bridge this gap, and particularly the former aspect of it.

However, the bridging of this gap does not take place in a vacuum. In fact, as suggested above, the field of Chinese studies has engaged Said's »Orientalism« in at least some form. Precisely, despite Puett refraining from using the term »Orientalist« in his critique of Roger Ames and David Hall as »cultural essentialists«, authors who both build on his work and share a close academic relationship with him employ it to enhance and reinforce his criticism. Thus, Ames comments that »Paul Goldin and Michael Puett have indicted me and my collaborators as offering what Goldin again calls ›an updated Orientalism.«<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Goldin leveled such criticism in an article featured in *Monumenta Serica*, a highly regarded sinological journal, to be precise, in 2008.<sup>2</sup> This critique emerged six years after Puett's release of his magnum opus, *To Become a God*.<sup>3</sup> In a relative departure from Puett's criticism of

the Hall & Ames duo in that work, which primarily centered around the charge of »cultural essentialism«, Goldin's article adopted a notably acerbic tone, characterizing Hall & Ames's work not only as »Orientalist« but also as sterile, fallacious and reductive.<sup>4</sup> By accusing Hall & Ames of »Orientalism«, Goldin was utilizing a term that, by the late 2000s, had already become heavily infused with moral and political implications. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, within specific academic circles in the United States, the terms »Orientalist« and »Orientalism« had gained significant traction. In this context, they had become ethically and politically charged, primarily serving as tools for moral condemnation and indictments of academic incompetence. Goldin's article employed the term precisely in this manner. However, as Ames also notes, this phenomenon continues to persist.<sup>5</sup> More recently, in 2019, Edward Slingerland similarly employed the term »Neo-Orientalist«, suggesting, among other things, that the work of Ames and his colleagues has »elevated older forms of Orientalism to new levels of verbal absurdity«. <sup>6</sup> Overall, the association of »Orientalism« with concepts like absurdity, sterility, and reductionism appears to serve not only as an academic objection of Ames' methodology but also, and perhaps more prominently, as a means to politically and ethically discredit Ames and his adherents on a nearly personal level. It is precisely this dimension of Slingerland's criticism of Ames' work that has prompted Jim Behuniak to write a markedly negative review of Slingerland's *Mind and Body in Early China*, in an effort to »set the record straight«.<sup>7</sup> Even more recently, in 2022, Ames himself has felt the need for »unloading the essentialism charge«, as indicated in the title of his publication, wherein he responds to the criticisms of

1 Ames: *Unloading the Essentialism Charge: Some Methodological Reflections in Doing Philosophy of Culture*, 55.

2 Goldin: *The Myth that China has No Creation Myth*.

3 Puett: *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*.

4 Goldin: *The Myth*, 21.

5 Ames: *Unloading*, 55.

6 Slingerland: *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism*, 1.

7 Behuniak: *Slingerland, Edward, Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism*, 306.

Puett, Goldin and Slingerland.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, it would have made perfect sense for the same piece to be titled »unloading the *Orientalism* charge«. Relatedly, the fact that Ames has felt the need to »unload« rather than to refute the charges levied against him and his colleagues by the aforementioned scholars serves to confirm the heavily moralistic and condemnatory tone of their writings. That is, the use of such term suggests that Ames has experienced their accusations not just as an academic reproach but also, and perhaps most notably, as a moral and political burden, a cross that weighs on him, and those around him, on a rather personal level. As noted, this appears to have been the very intention behind the abovementioned publications by Slingerland, Goldin and Puett, and particularly the former, as explained by Behuniak.

As suggested above, in their attacks against Ames and his entourage/in labeling Ames and company as »Orientalist«, both authors refer to the work of Puett. Goldin references Puett thrice<sup>9</sup> and praises one of his books.<sup>10</sup> Slingerland quotes from Puett's *To Become a God* to challenge Ames, Henry Rosemont, and François Jullien, among others.<sup>11</sup> It may catch the attention of many that, while building upon Puett's work, both Slingerland and Goldin abstain from utilizing the notion of »cultural essentialism«, which is central to Puett's critique of Ames and Hall. As observed, they instead favor the term »Orientalism«. However, in embracing this terminology, Goldin and Slingerland have delved into the ethico-political implications of Puett's critical description of Hall & Ames as »cultural essentialists«, that is, as scholars who argue that »China and Greece (indeed, all of the West) are distinguished by radically different cosmologies – the Western tradition being defined in terms of (among other things) a disjunction between man and god, and the Chinese assuming an

inherent correlation and linkage.«<sup>12</sup> In fact, an almost identical argument is rehearsed by Goldin:

»... it should be emphasized that ›China has no creation myth‹ typifies one of the worst fallacies in comparative study. Comparing world cultures does not mean identifying something purportedly essential about the West and then poking around to see whether the same thing exists somewhere else. Regrettably, this has been the approach of most comparative work involving China... what is most wrong is that this mode of inquiry prevents China from being anything more than a pallid reflection of the West.«<sup>13</sup>

According to Goldin, »the most forceful exponents of this view have been David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames.«<sup>14</sup> Thus, Goldin joins Puett in objecting to the Hall and Ames' contrastive methodology. However, while this methodology has led Puett to accuse them of »essentialism«, it has prompted Goldin to level the charge of »Orientalism« against them. The same applies to Slingerland, as he, among the »examples all of the central features of the neo-Orientalist stance,« references the notion of »Chinese culture as concrete and strongly holistic. This monolithic Chinese culture is portrayed as uniquely and strongly holistic or concrete, and contrasted with a dualistic and abstract West.«<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, he argues that »the Orientalist-essentialist view of China leads us astray«<sup>16</sup> and advocates for »the benefits, when it comes to the study of early Chinese thought, of moving beyond Orientalism and myths of cultural essentialism.«<sup>17</sup> Logically, as per Goldin's and Slingerland's formulations, one of the most defining features of (Neo-)Orientalism is the articulation of »essential« differences between China and the West. Therefore, this clarifies the specific relationship between Goldin's and Slingerland's »Neo/

8 Ames: *Unloading*.

9 Goldin: *The Myth*, 7 n. 29, 15 n. 58, 16 n. 60.

10 Ibid., 2 n. 6.

11 Slingerland: *Mind*, 2.

12 Puett: *To Become*, 21.

13 Goldin: *The Myth*, 21.

14 Ibid., 3.

15 Slingerland: *Mind*, 29.

16 Ibid., 11.

17 Ibid., 22.

Updated Orientalism« and Puett's »cultural essentialism«.

Relatedly, the association of »Orientalism« with »cultural essentialism« is rooted on the premise that, as per Said's *Orientalism*, the act of establishing cultural distinctions inevitably entails exoticism and various forms of stereotyping. Goldin subscribes to this assumption in the mentioned statement that »what is most wrong is that [Hall and Ames' ›updated Orientalism‹] mode of inquiry prevents China from being anything more than a pallid reflection of the West.« He goes on to elucidate the concept of »reflection« as follows:

»Whether that reflection is good or bad tends to vary with the sympathies of the investigator. To Joseph Needham, for example, China is great because the three arch-inventions extolled by Francis Bacon – namely printing, gunpowder, and the magnet – originated, unbeknownst to Bacon himself, in China. But this is merely a well intentioned instantiation of the same sterile method, the same reduction of China to the role of the West's shadow.«<sup>18</sup>

Goldin suggests that by making a comparison between China and the West that favors China (in the sense that Chinese science anticipated aspects of modern Western scientific knowledge), Needham has essentially replicated »the same sterile method« associated with Orientalism. The distinction lies merely in his use of this method with a well-meaning purpose, as opposed to the malevolent intent originally expounded by Said in his iconic book. Equally, Slingerland mentions the idea of »the Chinese ›Other‹ as normatively superior« among the central aspects of »the neo-Orientalist stance«, arguing that it »represents merely a slight reworking of the Noble Savage myth that has maintained a hold on the minds of European intellectuals for centuries.«<sup>19</sup> In line with this interpretation, the act of establishing a differentiation between Chinese culture and Western culture, where the former takes prece-

dence over the latter, can be deemed as, or perhaps even more, »Orientalist« than establishing the inverse cultural differentiation originally described by Said. In simpler terms, according to this viewpoint, what characterizes »Orientalism« is the mere establishment of mystified cultural differences, regardless of which culture is favored or dominates the distinction. By granting China priority over the West, Hall and Ames have simply reverted the traditional Orientalist valuation of cultural »essences«. In doing so, however, they have remained decidedly within the framework of Orientalism and »cultural essentialism«. It is in this sense, therefore, that it can be said that Hall, Ames and their followers offer an »updated Orientalism« or »neo-Orientalism«. Interestingly, in his effort to »unload« the accusation of essentialism/Orientalism, Ames tacitly agrees with Goldin's and Slingerland's definition of Orientalism as the act of demarcating cultural distinctions with exoticizing intention or effect:

»[Said's] cautionary corrective has resulted in valuable efforts to peel back layers of exotic and universalizing veneer that previous generations of scholarship had effectively laid over cultural realities, and to bring to light the often complex and convoluted striations of living, changing cultures. In rejecting cultural essentializing, a genuine endeavor has been made in the scholarship to try with imagination to take other cultures on their own terms. However, this important attempt to rethink and get past the naïve constructions of cultural others now runs the risk of obscuring the crucial and still vital role played by assaying differences in ways of thinking and living, and by acknowledging persistent cultural ideals in engendering and sustaining cultural change.«<sup>20</sup>

Thereby, Ames seems to make a distinction between cultural differentiations that succumb to the pitfalls of exoticism and essentialism, and cultural differentiations that do not. It is suggested that in their efforts to overcome the shortcomings of the former, Said and his followers have lost sight of the latter. According to

18 Goldin: *The Myth*, 21.

19 Ibid., 29–30.

20 Ames: *Unloading*, 64.

this formulation, Said did not contemplate the possibility of delineating contrasts between East and West *without* surrendering to the limitations of exoticism and essentialism. As suggested, this understanding of »Orientalism« is identical to Goldin's and Slingerland's. In his replies to their criticism, Ames appears to assent to this understanding of Said's work and then attempt to move beyond it by calling for a reappraisal of the highlighting of cultural divergences, particularly in reference to its »vital role« in intercultural communication. In other words, Ames appears to convey that if Orientalism entails exoticism and essentialism, then we must aim to transcend it, and his work should be regarded as such an endeavor, not as a mere repetition of its shortcomings.

Broadly speaking, these represent the defining features of the discourse on Orientalism within the realm of sinological and philosophical research on ancient China. Concerning the assumptions that have hitherto underpinned this discourse, as elucidated above, it is crucial to underscore the following: The terms »Orientalist« and »Orientalism« encompass more than mere labels employed to discredit individuals or to function as synonyms for highlighting cultural disparities. Ames himself addresses the derogatory use of »Orientalist« when asking: »How did «oriental» as the opposite of «occidental» become a bad word? In service to the idea that many voices should be heard, Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* (1978) made the claim that largely for political reasons «Oriental Studies» in the Western academy has constructed a distorted and condescending description of Islamic cultures in service to its own self-image and understanding.«<sup>21</sup> Ames' question appears to prompt readers to contemplate the notion that the term »Orientalist« carries more significance than being a mere pejorative. We agree with Ames in emphasizing the importance of moving away from using »Orientalism« merely as a derogatory term. Furthermore, we also agree with his suggestion that, while attempting to surpass the limitations of the Orientalist framework,

we should first direct our attention to the original use of the term in Said's work, particularly concerning its political connotations. However, it should be emphasized that this effort should proceed by challenging the notion that, in Said's original formulation, »Orientalism« is merely a synonym for the highlighting of cultural disparities with exoticizing intention or effect. Although Ames challenges the derogatory use of the term Orientalism, he, however, fails to challenge this definition of said term.

As we shall see below, this is crucial for reframing the terms of the debate. Moreover, challenging such notion provides a unique opportunity for reappraising the work of Puett considering the oeuvre of Said and other scholars.

#### ORIENTALISM: CULTURAL DIFFERENTIATION AND IMPERIALISM

It is essential to emphasize that in his book *Orientalism*, Said suggests that the discourse of »Orientalism« is not restricted to the delineation of exoticizing contrasts between cultures. Granted, such discourse does entail such contrasts. Thus, Said argues that »Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between »the Orient« and (most of the time) »the Occident«.<sup>22</sup> However, shortly after that, he states that Orientalism should be understood primarily as »as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient«.<sup>23</sup> Thereby, Said explains that the most defining characteristic of the Orientalist discourse is not so much that it establishes cultural distinctions but that it does so with the specific intention or effect of achieving a geopolitical objective, namely, that of serving the interests of Western imperialism:<sup>24</sup>

»In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series

<sup>21</sup> Ames: *Unloading*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Said: *Orientalism*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Said often uses the concepts of »hegemony« and »imperialism« as synonyms. See Said: *Orientalism*, 339.

of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand... Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy»<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, according to Said, Orientalism is a direct product of Western hegemony or imperialism, serving as a »flexible positional superiority«. This means that irrespective of the Westerner's role – whether as »the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier«<sup>26</sup> – they consistently hold the dominant position in East-West interactions. In anticipation of potential misunderstandings or criticisms of this argument, Said offers the following remarks:

»I doubt that it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later nineteenth century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact [of Western imperialism] – and yet *that is what I am saying* in this study of Orientalism.«<sup>27</sup>

Thereby, Said clarifies that he *does* advocate for the claim that all academic knowledge of the Orient (that is, all Orientalism) is infused with Western imperialism and colonialism. Correspondingly, Said observes that »Orientalism brings one up directly against that question – that is, to realizing that political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions – in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility.«<sup>28</sup> Again, Said's point is that this complete sphere of scholarly inquiry falls directly under the dominion

of Western imperialism. Orientalism is thus defined as »a distribution of geopolitical awareness«<sup>29</sup>, a »strategic location«<sup>30</sup> and a »strategic formation«<sup>31</sup>.

The above has significant implications for assessing the debate surrounding Orientalism in sinology and comparative philosophy. Notably, it underscores that Orientalism should not be conflated with all forms of cultural differentiation. Instead, Orientalism specifically pertains to a cultural differentiation between the West and the Orient, in which the West assumes a dominant position. Within the comparanda of Orientalism, the West consistently occupies the role of the dominant variable. According to Said, this is unavoidable: Western theoretical predominance is a direct result and an essential counterpart of Western geopolitical hegemony. The systematic assertion of such dominance through Orientalism was fundamental to the bolstering of Western power and culture, insofar as »... European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.«<sup>32</sup> Through this process of contrasting with the Orient, Europe forged »one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.«<sup>33</sup> In this vein, the discursive primacy of the West over the Orient is not a mere incidental aspect of Orientalism. Consequently, and in contrast to the viewpoints put forth by Goldin and Slingerland, inverting the valuation of variables in an East-West comparison does not constitute a manifestation or modification of the Orientalist discourse. Instead, it delineates an entirely distinct narrative. In other words, the development of an East-West cultural differentiation in which China assumes the dominant position is a theoretical construct that openly challenges a fundamental trope of Orientalism: Western hegemony. In this sense, characterizing Hall and Ames' work as a »neo-Orientalist stance« or an »updated

25 Ibid., 7.

26 Ibid., 7.

27 Ibid., 11, brackets are mine.

28 Ibid., 13–14.

29 Ibid., 12.

30 Ibid., 20.

31 Ibid., 20.

32 Ibid., 3.

33 Ibid., 1.



Orientalism« overlooks a crucial aspect of Orientalist discourse, as originally elucidated by Said.

Nonetheless, this should not be read as an indication that, as Ames suggests, Said has failed to consider the possibility of establishing cultural contrasts without falling prey to exoticism or essentialism. In fact, Said explicitly acknowledges this potential:

»Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power. These are all tasks left embarrassingly incomplete in this study.«<sup>34</sup>

In this paragraph, Said acknowledges the potential for studying cultures in a non-Orientalist manner, though he admits to not extensively developing this idea within the pages of *Orientalism*. It is plausible to speculate that Hall and Ames have undertaken the systematic development of the project Said left unfinished, primarily through their sophisticated hermeneutical reflection and philological study. However, as Said suggests, the endeavor to provide non-Orientalist interpretations of cultures ultimately hinges on the ability to »rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power«<sup>35</sup>. While Ames acknowledges this political dimension of Orientalism, he does not systematically explore it. In this paper, my aim is to address this gap and demonstrate that by overlooking the political dimension of Orientalism, Ames missed a crucial opportunity to effectively defend himself and his followers against the charges of Orientalism. Furthermore, focusing on the political aspect of Orientalist discourse provides an invaluable opportunity to examine the neo-Orientalist aspects of Puett's interpretation of early China. However, accomplishing this will require addressing other fundamental aspects of Orientalism in Said's work, specifically, representation

and authority. These aspects offer a compelling point of comparison with other significant thinkers, including Spivak, Lander and Santos.

#### REPRESENTATION, AUTHORITY AND VISIBILITY IN THE ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE

As quoted above, Orientalism consists of allegedly »having authority over the Orient« in a theoretical sense. This represents that, according to Said, Orientalist discourse is constructed primarily through specific practices of academic authoritative representation.

»... that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ›there‹ in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions ...«<sup>36</sup>

Orientalist discourse relies not only on specific »techniques of representation« but also on the academic traditions and institutions that uphold them. It is also this institutional support that grants Orientalism academic authority:

»... the Orient therefore constitutes an analyzable formation – for example, that of philological studies, of anthologies of extracts from Oriental literature, of travel books, of Oriental fantasies – whose presence in time, in discourse, in institutions (schools, libraries, foreign services) gives it strength and authority.«<sup>37</sup>

Orientalism, therefore, is not only a theoretical construct but also an academic and social practice that takes place in the context of specific scholarly institutions. Said suggests the »strength and authority« of the Orientalist discourse relies on the temporal durability and continued deployment of these academic and institutional habits.<sup>38</sup> In turn, the epistemic and

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>38</sup> Orientalism is not a »bad« personality trait or a moral »stain« one carries. This »moralistic« reading loses sight

institutional authority of the Orientalist representation is ultimately built upon the alleged capacity to »make the Orient visible«:

»... my concern with authority does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes. I do not think that this idea can be overemphasized. Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.«<sup>39</sup>

Said suggests that Orientalist discourse is grounded in explicit claims. That is, Orientalism inhabits the surface or exteriority of a given text, and therefore not its hidden interiority. The exteriority of the Orientalist text is fundamental to its functioning because it is only through explicit statements that the Orientalist can assert the alleged capacity to make the Orient speak and effectively unveil its enigmas to Western audiences, particularly those associated with reputable academic institutions. Furthermore, the necessary counterpart of Orientalist insight is the notion that the Orient cannot speak for itself:

»The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.«<sup>40</sup>

of what is at stake in a discussion about Orientalism. More precisely, this reading tends to overlook the way in which, according to Said, Orientalist scholarship operates in practice, that is, as authoritative representation. Indeed, one of the most defining features of Orientalist representation is that it does not operate as something that could be personalised or moralised. As a form of representation, Orientalism is beyond morality and personality: It is scientific objectivity itself. In this sense, Orientalist scholarship is the exact opposite of a thing to be shun by peers or society in general. That is, it is fundamentally compatible with the expectations and values of society, and therefore, it is to be praised as reputable knowledge.

39 Said: *Orientalism*., 20–21.

40 Ibid., 21.

According to Said, Orientalist representation is founded on the truism that the Orient cannot represent itself. Thus, the role of the Orientalist is to make the representation of the Orient possible for both the West and the Orient. It is precisely in this sense that Said claims that Orientalism has the capacity of making the Orient visible to readers. It is important to emphasize that this Orientalist capacity necessarily relies on the truism of the Oriental incapacity for self-representation. Said highlights that the Orientalist systematically refuses to entertain the possibility that the Orient is capable of uttering its own truths. While analyzing Sir Arthur James Balfour's lecture on Egypt before the House of Commons, Said observed that »it does not occur to Balfour, however, to let the Egyptian speak for himself.«<sup>41</sup> Balfour wholeheartedly believes that »he knows how they [the Egyptians] feel since he knows their history, their reliance upon such as he, and their expectations. Still, he does speak for them in the sense that what they might have to say, were they to be asked and might they be able to answer, would somewhat uselessly confirm what is already evident.«<sup>42</sup> In other words, Balfour exemplifies the Orientalist truism that the Orient suffers a chronic inability to speak by itself. This truism, in turn, grounds his utmost confidence in his unique ability as an Orientalist to render the Orient understandable by speaking on its behalf: The content of the Orient is so self-evident to Balfour that he deems it *unnecessary* to inquire the Orientals about it and thus consider the possibility of their self-representations.

At this juncture, it would be highly beneficial to discuss other scholars who have also examined the interplay between Western ability to represent the Orient and Oriental inability to represent itself. To begin this discussion, let us start with Gayatri Spivak. As it will become apparent, Spivak's concept of »epistemic violence« powerfully resembles Said's notion of Orientalist representation and authority.

41 Ibid., 33.

42 Ibid., 34–35, brackets are mine.

## EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

The concept of »epistemic violence« was originally coined by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay »*Can the Subaltern Speak?*«, wherein she defines it as follows:

»The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity.«<sup>43</sup>

In this sense, epistemic violence is identical to a process of »Othering.« But as Spivak explains in the prolegomena to this conclusion, such violence is exerted not only through the constitution of an »Other« but also, and perhaps most notably, through the specific type of representation (*Vertretung*) that the Othering process entails. To explain, the specificity of such representation is to be found in the colonial erasure of non-European subjectivity:

»It is not only that everything they [contemporary French intellectuals, i. e. Deleuze and Foucault] read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary – not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law.«<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the process in which the Other-of-Europe is produced is identical to the process in which Europe-as-Subject is constituted. In this way, non-Europe (the Other) is, by definition, an object whose subjectivity has already been denied. By erasing all »the textual ingredients« that could have allowed for the emergence of the Other as a subject, non-Europe was effectively denied the possibility of representing itself. Accordingly, after citing a colonial law sanctioning the

forced Anglicization of the Indian elite under British rule, Spivak turns to a practice of representation that, for cultural and linguistic reasons, is more familiar to her, namely, Indology, particularly as it relates to the knowledge of the Sanskrit language:

»Within the [disciplinary formation in Sanskrit studies], the cultural explanations generated by authoritative scholars matched the epistemic violence of the legal project. I locate here the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, the Indian Institute at Oxford in 1883, and the analytic and taxonomic work of scholars like Arthur Macdonnell and Arthur Berriedale Keith, who were both colonial administrators and organizers of the matter of Sanskrit.«<sup>45</sup>

Through this and other examples, Spivak seems to suggest that European practices of subjectivation/objectivation run parallel to, or are identical with, European practices of knowledge production, wherein Europe is the knowing subject, while non-Europe is the object of knowledge. Such practices, in turn, are based on the assumed capacity of Europeans to speak on behalf of non-Europeans, that is, to represent them. The epistemic violence of these representations lies in the alleged ability of European scholars to construct knowledge of the Other *without its participation or inclusion* in the process of knowledge production. Given that the Other is not a Subject, not only it cannot represent itself but also it cannot produce knowledge by and of itself. Such an epistemology exerts its violence not only through the alleged capacity to monopolize the production of knowledge about the Other but also by implicitly or explicitly deprecating and/or erasing the knowledge that the Other has of itself prior to and independently from European colonization. To the extent that such »native« knowledge assumes the capacity to enact its own subjectivity, its existence and/or validity is simply inconceivable.

Perceptive readers will notice that Spivak advances arguments akin to those expounded by Said. Specifically, like Said, Spivak elucidates that the construc-

43 Spivak: *Can The Subaltern Speak?*, 249.

44 Ibid., 248, brackets are mine.

45 Ibid., 251, brackets are mine.

tion of the Other occurs through a process of comparison with Europe, grounded in the assumption that the Other lacks the ability to represent itself, thereby conferring exclusive representational authority to Western scholars and administrators. Furthermore, in a manner reminiscent of Said, Spivak applies these ideas within the context of a discipline dedicated to the study of the Orient, specifically Indology or Sanskrit studies. The primary distinction between Said's and Spivak's arguments lies in their choice of terminology: Spivak employs the concept of »the Other«, while Said uses »the Orient«. Spivak discusses »epistemic violence,« whereas Said refers to »Orientalist representation.« Despite these terminological distinctions, their hypotheses remain largely congruent. To further explore these issues, I will now shift my focus to the works of Edgardo Lander and Santiago Castro-Gómez.

#### COLONIALIDAD DEL SABER

As Edgardo Lander explains, the different facets of epistemic violence and Orientalist representation can be found in the hermeneutical presuppositions of the social sciences:

»... the social sciences have served more for the establishment of contrasts with the universal (normal) cultural-historical experience of Europe ... than for the knowledge of [non-Western] societies based on their cultural-historical specificities ... By affirming the universal character of Eurocentric scientific knowledge, the study of all other cultures and peoples has been approached on the basis of the modern Western experience, thus contributing to concealing, denying, subordinating, or extirpating any cultural experience or expression that has not corresponded to this *ought to be* that underlies the social sciences.«<sup>46</sup>

Correspondingly, »the other forms of being, the other forms of organization of society, the other forms of knowledge, are transformed not only into different but also into lacking, archaic, primitive, traditional,

pre-modern ones.«<sup>47</sup> The consequences of this understanding are nefarious:

»By naturalizing and universalizing the ontological regions of the liberal worldview that underlie their disciplinary boundaries, the social sciences have been unable to address cultural-historical processes different from those postulated by that worldview. By characterizing »traditional« or »non-modern« cultural expressions as in the process of transition to modernity, the possibility of their own cultural logics or worldviews is denied. By placing them as an expression of the past, the possibility of their contemporaneity is denied.«<sup>48</sup>

Accordingly, based on Quijano's idea of the coloniality of power, Lander refers to the social sciences' simultaneous enthronement of European experiences and debasement of non-European ones as the coloniality of knowledge (*colonialidad del saber*). Such an enthronement/debasement is, of course, an act of epistemic violence. More specifically, this violence takes the form of an epistemic preclusion. In its gnoseological dimension, and particularly regarding the social sciences, coloniality has the effect of preventing the emergence or recognition of experiences and worldviews beyond the confines of the West. Thus, Santiago Castro-Gómez concludes that »the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge are embedded in the same genetic matrix.«<sup>49</sup> By this, he means that:

»... the social sciences take place within this space of modern/colonial power, and within the ideological knowledge generated by it. From this point of view, the social sciences never made an »epistemological rupture« – in the Althusserian sense – in the face of ideology, but rather the colonial imaginary permeated their entire conceptual system from their origins.«<sup>50</sup>

In sum, according to Lander and Castro-Gómez, the social sciences bear the mark of the coloniality of po-

47 Ibid., 24.

48 Ibid., 26.

49 Castro-Gómez: *Ciencias sociales, violencia epistémica*, 154

50 Ibid., 153.

46 Lander: *Ciencias Sociales*, 25.

wer/knowledge, showing a chronic incapacity to even conceive the possibility that non-Western experiences either a) exist as such, b) or, if they do, they are valid or valuable. In each case, the surveys of the social scientist end up exactly where they started, namely, Europe and its experience of the world. For the purposes of this paper, I'd like to show that this is also the case for area studies, particularly sinology. To explain this point, I now turn to the work of Michael Puett on early Chinese ritual.

### MICHAEL PUETT'S »BROKEN WORLD OF EXPERIENCE«

Michael Puett is a graduate of the University of Chicago, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of renowned anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and respected sinologist Edward Shaughnessy. A professor at Harvard University for almost thirty years, he came to prominence in the early 2000s with the publishing of *The Ambivalence of Creation* (2001) and *To Become a God* (2002). The main hypothesis of the latter is that both in ancient China and early Greece the practice of sacrifice involves a tragic or »agonistic« separation between humans and gods which is later challenged by the emergence of »monistic« practices of self-divinization. The former argument is made through a comparison between Prometheus and Jiangyuan 姜嫄 and Houji 后稷,<sup>51</sup> the latter through a comparison between Empedocles and the *Neiye* 內業.<sup>52</sup> According to Puett, although the sacrifice-centered, »agonistic« cosmology of human-divine tensions emerged in the early Zhou period, it persisted, despite challenges, through the Warring States, as attested in texts such as the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 and the *Liji* 禮記.<sup>53</sup> However, this view is not developed extensively in *To Become a God*. Instead, it is in various subsequent publications dedicated exclusively to the *Liji* that Puett has developed these points more systematically. Therein, he argues that the *Liji*,

like several other early Chinese texts, endorses the view that »the world, at least in our experience, is one of discontinuity,«<sup>54</sup> or that »in other words, [it] is always fragmented and fractured.«<sup>55</sup>

I am not interested here in going into the minutiae of how the contents of the *Liji* and other ancient Chinese texts should or can be interpreted. Regarding these matters, I direct the reader to my doctoral dissertation.<sup>56</sup> What is of interest regarding our discussion in these pages is that, on several occasions, Puett himself admits that the texts openly make claims that point in the directly opposite direction of his conclusions. Moreover, in a manner highly reminiscent of Said's Orientalism and Spivak's epistemic violence, when Puett encounters such statements he dismisses them by appealing to a truism. For example, in reference to passages from the *Liyun* 禮運 and *Jifa* 祭法 chapters of the *Liji*, he says the following:

»In both cases of agriculture and ritual, all under Heaven comes to be taken as a single family (ICS 9.22/62/5). But, of course, the world is not really a single family; it is simply domesticated at both the cosmic and societal levels to operate as such to whatever degree possible. Another chapter of the same text (the »Jifa«) presents the pantheon of gods as a humanly constructed one, organized according to the hierarchies and patterns advantageous to human growth (ICS 123/24/9). The resulting pantheon is a perfectly ordered hierarchy – but, at the same time, of course it is not.«<sup>57</sup>

The use of the adverb »of course« in these explanations is highly illuminating of Puett's hermeneutical presuppositions. More precisely, its usage shows that for Puett it is a truism that the world could not and was not conceived as it is in fact described in the text. The statements made by the text, according to this view, are mere indicators of a deeper, universal, pre-textual reality. Thus, the *Liji*, or any other text, is to be inter-

51 Puett: *To Become a God*, 72–75.

52 Ibid., 116–119.

53 Ibid., 96–97.

54 Puett: *Constructions of reality*, 124.

55 Puett: *The Haunted World of Humanity*, 101.

56 Rivera Espinoza: *Subversive Cosmology in the Zhuangzi*.

57 Puett: *Ritual disjunctions*, 226.

puted according to universal parameters that precede it, parameters which indicate that the authors and/or readers of the text could *not* have really conceived the world as a single family, or the pantheon of the gods as a perfectly ordered hierarchy. Did Puett, at any moment, even conceive of the possibility that the authors of the *Liji* could have actually understood the world in terms of harmony and order? Apparently not, and this is the case even though the text itself, as Puett himself suggests, allows for such a conclusion. In this sense, and in line with the arguments of Spivak and Said, Puett's argumentation fails to acknowledge the possibility of China's capacity for self-representation, at the same time that it asserts the ability to give voice to China and proficiently reveal its mysteries to Western audiences. This line of reasoning can be found in several other pieces written by Puett and with regard to other ancient Chinese texts, for instance, the *Xunzi* 荀子:

»As *Xunzi* puts it, humans now form a triad with Heaven and Earth, with each performing a crucial function in an ordered cosmos: Heaven provides the seasons, Earth provides the raw foodstuffs, and humans provide the order that gives Heaven and Earth their proper place. But, of course, the world does not always function this way.«<sup>58</sup>

Just as in the previous example, here Puett prevents the reader from concluding that the *Xunzi* intended the literal meaning of what it stated. The underlying logic behind this reading approach appears to be as follows: While the text does assert that humans, heaven, and earth constitute a harmonious whole, it is *self-evident* that it did not intend this statement literally. What is involved in formulating this truism is, once again, the undeniable presence of a pre-existing reality that precedes the text and necessarily shapes the contours of its semantic possibilities.<sup>59</sup> In a prior

work, Puett elaborates further on the nature of this pre-textual reality:

»These arguments imply that ritual always operates in a world that is fragmented and fractured. Moreover, the subjunctive world created by ritual is always doomed ultimately to fail – the ordered world of flawless repetition can never fully replace the broken world of experience. This is why the tension between the two is inherent and, ultimately, unbridgeable. Indeed, this tension is the driving force behind the performance of ritual: the endless work of ritual is necessary precisely because the ordered world of ritual is inevitably only temporary. The world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring the repairs of ritual. If the world is always fractured, and if ritual always operates in tension with such a world, then we need to think of ritual in terms of such an endlessly doomed dynamic. Ritual should be seen as operating in, to again quote Robert Orsi, »the register of the tragic.« Although the claims of ritual may be of an ordered, flawless system, the workings of ritual are always in the realm of the limited and the ultimately doomed.«<sup>60</sup>

ons of the writers have *more* validity, and *more* explanatory power, than the ideas contained in the texts themselves. This approach merely moves the set of assumptions beyond the texts themselves and furthermore, in so doing, removes much of the validity of the texts themselves. In trying to uncover the »true« significance and meaning of these texts, it was the political situation that these texts reveal that is presumed to have had more explanatory power. Objectivity is seen to lie not in the words of the texts – for they are merely sophistic and rhetorical – but in the motivations of a text's author. This leads to the philosophical ideas themselves losing their intrinsic validity: the ideas embodied in the text make no claims on the scholar.« (Xiang: *Orientalism*, 27) I concur entirely with this conclusion. However, I would like to supplement it by emphasizing that the broad hermeneutical principles correctly identified by Xiang in Puett's work constrain not only the examination of political aspects but also extend to virtually any subject encompassed by the ancient Chinese texts Puett explores and references in his scholarly pursuits.

60 Puett: *Ritual and the Subjunctive*, 30.

58 Puett: *The Haunted World of Humanity*, 97.

59 I should mention I am not the first one to recognize this aspect of Puett's hermeneutics. In a thought-provoking article on recent heuristic trends in Anglophone sinology, Shuchen Xiang 项舒晨 explains the following: »Puett's methodological assumption is that the political motivati-

Here we learn that the pre-textual reality that Puett constantly appeals to is nothing less than the very experience of the world as it *always* presents itself to any human that has ever lived, that is, in the form of a tragic fragmentation, an irreducible fracture. For Puett, the fact that such experience is universally valid goes without saying. In fact, the fragmentation and brokenness of human experience is automatically posited as a truism, as suggested by the casual usage not only of the adverb »of course« but also of expressions like »the broken world of experience« or assertions like »the world is always fractured.« Through the use of this terminology, Puett effectively subordinates the interpretation of early Chinese texts to the truism of fractured experience. Correspondingly, the reason that ritual »always operates in a world that is fragmented and fractured« is that the world, for self-evident reasons, is experienced as fractured and fragmented. The formulation of this truism follows the principles outlined in Said's Orientalist representation and Spivak's epistemic violence, specifically, by negating the capacity of the text to speak for itself: It is admitted that the text makes claims »of an ordered, flawless system,« but still, we are prevented from concluding that this is what the text actually means. In fact, we are told, it means the exact opposite of this, it speaks of doom and gloom. Puett explains the disparity between textual claims and pre-textual reality in terms of »the subjunctive world,« or simply »the subjunctive:«

»Ritual, therefore, should best be understood as working precisely out of the incongruity of the subjunctive of ritual and the actual world of lived experience«<sup>61</sup>

According to this hypothesis, ritual creates a »subjunctive«, »imaginary,«<sup>62</sup>and/or »illusionary«<sup>63</sup> world. Let us highlight that the allegedly fictitious nature of »the subjunctive world created by ritual« is articulated against the assumed universality or objectivity of »the actual world of lived experience«. It is

only against the background of this rather questionable assumption that Puett can assert the »make-believe« nature of the ritual world. It is also interesting to note that such a world is identified with »the tragic«. More precisely, the alleged disparity between the ritual world and »the actual world« should be seen as working according to »the register of the tragic,« inasmuch as the illusions of ritual cannot ever prevail over the reality of experience. Such a register, however, is quintessentially Western. From Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* to Simon Critchley's *Tragedy, The Greeks & Us*, tragedy and the tragic have been explained as hallmarks of ancient Greek culture and thus Western civilization. It is thus fair to ask, doesn't the hypothesis of »the register of the tragic« or »the broken world of experience« amount to the universalization and naturalization of a distinctively European experience?

Overall, and based on the above, Puett's line of argumentation exemplifies the coloniality of knowledge as explained by Lander and Castro-Gómez. In fact, it replicates all its major tropes. By systematically denying truthfulness to the claims made by the text that he studies, Puett effectively denies himself and his readers the possibility of crediting non-Western experiences and worldviews, particularly those of ancient China. In this sense, and as Lander explains, he disavows »the possibility of their own cultural logics or worldviews«, thus »extirpating any cultural experience or expression that has not corresponded to this *ought to be* that underlies the social sciences«<sup>64</sup>. Particularly in his case, such social science is anthropology, and such ought-to-be is the tragic brokenness of experience. Accordingly, Puett's work is, I believe, a good example of how the social sciences' universalistic theoretical presuppositions can determine that their primary purpose becomes that of establishing »contrasts with the universal (normal) cultural-historical experience of Europe« rather than understanding »societies based on their cultural-historical specificities.« Furthermore, and returning to Spivak, as we delve deeper

61 Ibid., 27.

62 Ibid., 8.

63 Ibid., 22.

64 Lander: *Ciencias Sociales*, 25.

into this hypothesis, an even more problematic aspect emerges:

»The model we propose instead understands ritual as a subjunctive – the creation of an order as if it were truly the case. Or, putting it in different words, the subjunctive creates an order that is self-consciously distinct from other possible social worlds.«<sup>65</sup>

In passages like this, Puett explains yet another facet of his reading: It is not only that the world created by ritual is illusionary on account of the fact that it directly contradicts the allegedly fundamentally fractured nature of universal human experience, it is also that the early Chinese saw and described themselves explicitly in these terms, that is, they were entirely aware of the »make-believe« nature of the ritual world they created and willingly participated in such an imaginary enactment. If readers doubt the veracity of these conclusions, I refer them to the following:

»... it may appear to be an overly modernist reading, based upon unmasking the beliefs of traditional societies... But, in fact, is found explicitly in indigenous formulations... Indeed, the primary ritual classic from China – the Book of Rites – argues precisely this position...«<sup>66</sup>

Thus, by developing this theory, Puett claims to represent the early Chinese understanding of ritual and experience of the world. He claims to see and experience things and as the early Chinese themselves saw them and experienced them. Ironically, he claims this while he openly denies the veracity of the statements made by early Chinese texts, such as the *Liji* and the *Xunzi*.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, his argumentation replicates the

tropes of Orientalist representation as explained by Said: Puett claims the capacity to speak on behalf of »the Orientals« (in this instance, the Chinese) while, concurrently, neglecting to recognize the possibility of their own modes of representation and subjectivity.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Puett formulates these arguments within the framework of esteemed academic institutions, namely, the University of Chicago and Harvard University. Taking these factors into account, I find it reasonable to assert that Puett's hypothesis of the subjunctive exhibits Neo-Orientalist characteristics.<sup>69</sup>

### AGAINST THE WASTE OF [EARLY CHINESE] EXPERIENCE

Ultimately, considering the points discussed above, one might ponder the specific contributions made by universalist theories like Puett's to the exploration of human experience and subjectivity. Even if we accept the premises of this theory and acknowledge that it

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68 As mentioned above, asserting the capacity to represent with absolute precision the experiences and perceptions of the Other (or, as Puett describes it, »the indigenous«) is the quintessential Orientalist gesture. In this regard, Puett's hermeneutical stance meets the most fundamental criteria of Orientalist representation. Accordingly, Puett's reading is problematic not in terms of its specific propositional contents but on account of the fact that these contents are explained as exact and immediate representations of the experiences and perceptions of the Indigenous/Other. That is, Puett doesn't simply argue that the theory of »fractured experience« provides a valuable framework for reading early Chinese texts in the contemporary context; instead, he feels the need to locate this reading in the early Chinese mind itself. It is precisely this »need« that Said identifies as the most defining feature of Orientalist scholarship.

69 I refrain from categorizing these attributes solely as »Orientalist« since Puett's scholarly work diverges from one of the fundamental traits of Orientalism as delineated by Said. Specifically, Orientalism typically centers its claimed knowledge on the Orient, which does not apply to Puett's scholarship. Puett's theory of fractured experience, being fundamentally universalistic, purports to possess knowledge not confined to the Orient but rather extends to humanity as a whole, particularly in reference to human consciousness. In this sense, his scholarship is more aptly described as »Neo-Orientalist.«

65 Ibid., 20.

66 Puett: *Economies of Ghosts*, 96–97.

67 This reading is also problematic in the sense that it confuses the conscious with the unconscious, as well as the explicit with the implicit: How could these formulations be »found explicitly« in early Chinese texts if Puett systematically disavows us from crediting the truthfulness of the statements made by them? And given that it systematically circumvents the explicit, how could such reading *not* amount to an unmasking?



characterizes human experience as one marked by fracture, discontinuity, fragmentation, and the like, it is fair to ask, does this constitute novel knowledge? Is this view of experience not akin to the tragic perspective we have encountered repeatedly in ancient Greek philosophy? If Puett's theory does indeed align with that viewpoint, which I believe it does, then how can it offer a fresh understanding of human experience? Regrettably, it appears that it may not offer one at all. In fact, I would argue that this type of scholarship might lead to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos aptly termed a »waste of experience«:

»...many of the problems confronting the world today result from the waste of experience that the West imposed not only upon the world by force but also upon itself to sustain its own imposing upon the others.«<sup>70</sup>

To counter such a waste, Santos proposes a »sociology of absent ways of knowing, that is to say, the act of identifying the ways of knowing that hegemonic epistemology reduces to nonexistence.«<sup>71</sup> As the reader might notice, Santos' hegemonic epistemology – which he also refers to as »epistemicide« – is very much in line with Spivak's epistemic violence, Said's Orientalism and Lander's coloniality of knowledge. They all concur in emphasizing how Western-centric knowledge production effectively precludes the emergence of non-Western knowledges and experiences. In the above, I've endeavored to show that Puett's work is yet another example of such epistemic preclusion and »waste of experience«, or, more specifically, of early Chinese experience. And now, by way of Santos' »sociology of absences«, I hope we can delineate a way out of this conundrum, at least in a preliminary

way. More precisely, concurrently with this »sociology of absences«, whose purpose is to »expand the present«, Santos champions a »sociology of emergencies« geared towards »replacing the emptiness of the future (according to linear time) with a future of plural and concrete possibilities«<sup>72</sup>. Sociology, understood in this way, can bring about an expansion of human experience:

»This dense conception of contemporaneity – the conception of the present expanded by the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergencies for which it calls – allows for a radically broader experience of the world. ... »a world in which different worlds will fit comfortably,« to use the Neozapatista Subcomandante Marcos's slogan.«<sup>73</sup>

Accordingly, it is the widening and diversification of the »experience of the world« that can allow for the avoidance of the waste of experience. I'd like to finish this article by accepting Santos' and Subcomandante Marcos' invitation toward a polymorphous and broader world. Thus, if Puett shrinks the experience of the world by refusing to give credence to the claims made by ancient Chinese texts, then I propose that, in this particular case, the expansion of human experience, and more specifically the recognition and emergence of ancient Chinese experience, will necessarily depend on the adoption of a hermeneutic directly contrary to the one he favors. That is, it will depend on giving credence to early Chinese claims, on opening ourselves up to the possibility, once and for all, that they do mean what they say, that they do articulate a distinctive form of human experience, specifically as it crystallized in ancient China, even if in the form of textual vestiges and phenomenological glimpses.

70 Santos: *Epistemologies of the South*, 102.

71 Ibid., 111.

72 Ibid., 182.

73 Ibid., 240.

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