

“Philosophy and Metaphor: The Case of Early China”

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Western scholarship on early Chinese thought has been dominated by two attitudes toward the role of metaphor in early Chinese thought. One has been to ignore the foundational role of metaphor and analogy in early Chinese texts, seeing metaphor-based arguments as reducible to propositional—and therefore properly philosophical—statements. Another has been to see metaphor and analogy as uniquely Chinese modes of apprehending the world. According to this view, Western philosophy since the time of ancient Greece has been literal, analytic, logical and dualistic; Chinese thought, in contrast, is portrayed as “holistic,” uniquely image-based, and therefore not properly “philosophical.” In this talk I argue that both of these views of the role of metaphor in early China are mistaken, and have in fact served to distort our view of early Chinese thinkers. Although metaphor and analogy do indeed play a foundational, irreducible role in early Chinese philosophical rhetoric, this dependence of image-schematic concepts is by no means a unique feature of “the East.” Drawing on a large body of empirical work from a variety of fields in the cognitive sciences, I will attempt to demonstrate that *all* human cognition is heavily dependent on imagistic conceptual structures and cross-domain projections. What *is* unusual about early Chinese thought was the conscious attention that thinkers devoted to developing vivid and consistent sets of interlocking metaphors and metaphorical blends, which makes metaphor and blend analysis a particularly crucial tool when approaching these texts. I will conclude by reviewing an encouraging recent trend in the study of Chinese thought where, explicitly or not, scholars from a variety of backgrounds have begun to take metaphor more seriously as a foundational bearer of philosophical meaning in early China.