**Dialogue and Joint Attention: A Foundational Hermeneutical Response to Yang Huilin’s “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus: A Quest of ‘*Zhi*’ (知Knowing) and ‘*Xing*’ (行Application)”**

The questions raised by Prof. Yang in his study of the symmetry or parallel between the use of Epictetus’ *Encheiridion* by Matteo Ricci and by Michel Foucault respectively potentially go far beyond questions of history.[[1]](#footnote-1) We are concerned here not just with issues of transmission and influence but also with the appearance of significant, underlying, hermeneutical structures which concern the nature and possibility of inter-cultural dialogue. Ricci makes use of the Stoic Epictetus as a Christian missionary working in a Chinese context, while Foucault makes use of his work and person (Epictetus was born into slavery) from the perspective of a contemporary philosophical agenda of concern with “care of self”, with its historical Christian associations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Foucault is motivated by anti-Cartesian motivations which want to affirm the possibility of a truly transformational self. Both Ricci and Foucault have a parallel commitment to exploring powerfully integrated modes of “practice”, “acts” or “applications”. For the former, perhaps under the influence of Wang Yangming, such “enactivism” or “non-dualism” (to use our modern words) appeared to recommend itself to Ricci’s Confucian audience. Foucault, on the other hand, is concerned with the structure of our freedom. He argues that Cartesianism offers a transformational account of the self only in terms of our increasing approximation or assimilation into the observational third person perspective of science. This is a caricature of the transformation that should take place through the pursuit of truth: for these conditions “do not concern the subject in his being; they only concern the individual in his concrete existence, and not the structure of the subject as such”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here the truth cannot set us free.

Non-Speaking as “a meaning structure”

Drawing on the force of the Chinese principle that “Substance (*ti*) and Embodiment (*yong*) share one origin” (*ti yong yi yuan* 体用一源), which may have influenced Ricci, Yang argues that what comes into view here is not just contained in the term “application”, in contrast with “knowledge”. Nor can it be resolved into ethical action. It is rather the possibility of “a meaning structure” as such. It is this “meaning structure”, as a potential key to “cross-cultural understanding”, which is Yang’s chief focus of interest in his article.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the important third section of his paper, he develops this concept with a Derridean understanding of language as manifesting a certain “performativity”, which “exceeds even the order and structure of predictive discourse”. Since it “does not say what ‘is’”, this is a way of speaking which avoids a “discursive, logical, rhetorical, mode”. Yang is referring here to Derrida’s conception of a far-reaching “negative” hermeneutic, akin to “negative theology”, which refuses normative reference in favour of a deeper testimony to presence and existence. We can sketch out his position. Yang is referring to a mode of presence which encompasses cultural differences in meaning and interpretation. This points to an emphasis upon the materiality of language. The materiality of language is not only something that all speakers have in common, however different the conceptual content of their speech may be. The materiality of language is also coterminous with “world”. Through the suspension of direct linguistic reference by the subject, with its structures of objectification, instrumentalisation and control, something else can come into presence in language therefore – beyond the “is” – which is materiality itself: an embodied self seamlessly at home, with encountered others, in shared space and time.

Yang is proposing here that there is a kind of abstention from speech, or deliberate non-speaking, which is the renunciation of the controlling and separating codification of the world. This remains nevertheless a form of linguistic utterance or, more precisely, linguistic *presence*, and so is not the cessation of meaning but the possibility of a different kind of meaning, or indeed of a new depth of meaning, as a “meaning structure”.

This position finds significant resonances in Chinese tradition, but it goes without saying that this is a note that will sound strange to the modern Western ear.[[5]](#footnote-5) Since Hegel, language in modern Western tradition has been primarily understood in the light of a theory of knowledge which understands the contextuality, and so necessary limitations, of words as material sound and shape to be precisely what is “overcome” in the universalism of modern scientific knowledge. For all the abstractions of sixteenth century scholasticism, Matteo Ricci would still have had a distinctively pre-modern, materialist conception of language. It is worth reminding ourselves here that both Derrida (the North African Jew) and Foucault represent an intellectual sub-tradition in the West, which – in Foucault’s case – surprisingly goes back to Kant’s final work *Anthropology in Pragmatic Perspective* in which Kant drew extensively on the Romantic thought of Hamann and Herder.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Yang states that his interest goes beyond tracking how “the *Book of 25 Paragraphs* and *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*” brought Western ideas into China. For him rather it is the introduction of Foucault’s “thousand years of transformation” into Chinese structures of understanding which is the potential “decisive moment” or “thought event”.[[7]](#footnote-7) In short, this is a subtle way of identifying this particular sub-tradition as potentially offering a decisively new hermeneutical platform for dialogue between East and West.

Perspective and the Limits of East-West Dialogue

Under the spell cast by Prof. Yang’s subtle interweaving of hermeneutical perspectives around the common theme of Epictetus, for both Ricci and Foucault, this Western reader finds the picture compelling. But not all Western readers will be prepared to be carried along on what are, finally, interpretative strategies, rather than – for instance - directly historical ones (there is only an interpretative relation between Ricci and Foucault in this text). It may be that a Chinese reader will have a more robust and long term sense of a coherent Chinese tradition. In contrast, the Western reader is likely to feel that while the interpretation is informative and illuminating, it does not have the authority of the historical: it is not as if Foucault has read Ricci and has learnt from him in the way Foucault learns from the late Kant, for instance. If this *interpretation* of encounter which is both “intra- and inter-lingual” within East-West dialogue is to have the kind of authority which can – potentially – lend it a certain *normativity* within East-West dialogue (and so also potentially in ways which might have relevance to East-West relations), then we need at this point to find a different kind of discourse which can re-frame the interpretative here along more explicitly normative lines.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Let us recapitulate then. The interrogative method that Yang adopts in his study of Ricci and Foucault on Epictetus is one which invites us to share in the *perspective* of Matteo Ricci, specifically with respect to his view of Epictetus, and that of Michel Foucault, likewise in his view of Epictetus. By placing them together in this way, he is asking us to understand these two figures to be in dialogue with one another, across “a thousand years of transformation”, as he notes in Foucault’s phrase. He is inviting us to join him in viewing these two figures – Ricci and Foucault – as constituting for us a dialogue between East and West, primarily through the fact that they are both “looking at” Epictetus. Of course, this is framed in terms of culture contact (China and the West, Christianity and Stoicism, modern Europe and the classical tradition) and the productive tension between what he calls intra-lingual and inter-lingual encounters. Indeed, we can read this paper as a creative production of new understanding through the assembling of overlapping historical perspectives, as mediated by the two personalities sketched by the author for us. The figure of Ricci is contextualized in terms of the particular social and intellectual contexts which may have influenced him, whether Confucian, Ignatian, or the Greek influence of the Stoic Epictetus. Foucault on the other hand is represented in the intensity of his engagement with Epictetus, as a Greek slave born to a slave, who understood the claims of freedom. This is the creative production of a dialogue then which makes adroit use of the imagination, setting the scene in a way that makes new overlaps and new understandings possible.

TOWARDS A FUNDAMENTAL HERMENEUTIC OF PERSPECTIVE

But we can also read this text from within a different and more fundamental hermeneutic. In order to do that, we shall have to substitute one set of words for another. These are not intended to replace the terms used in Yang’s discussion however, but rather to enhance the range of their potential meanings. But we have to be prepared for the possibility that these new terms may offer a context within which the encounter between Chinese and Western terminology, as we find it developed in Yang’s discussion, can take on a new depth of meaning. If this is the case, and the advent of this new and fundamental hermeneutic appears to be in itself an occurrence which constitutes what Yang, following Foucault, calls “an event of thought”, then it will need to be considered carefully, from all sides, like any other ‘event’. It will have to be weighed and valued in the various contexts in which its “event character” occurs. This would be an interesting project but one which is a collaborative task that extends far beyond the reach of the present paper.

Joint Attention

The first term I want to introduce is “joint attention”.[[9]](#footnote-9) This can be associated directly with the notion of “perspective”. It belongs in the main within child development, but it is also applied in evolutionary anthropology. It points to the way in which human beings can focus together on a single object of attention, and is a form of behaviour which underlies the development of linguistic reference, empathy and our capacity to imagine the content of other minds. The acquisition of this skill is key in the early development of the growing child, and it is very likely that it originated early on in our evolutionary history (some intelligent mammals also show a capacity for “joint attention” though to a much less well developed degree than in humans).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Concealed within this “looking at *something* together” however is a further and largely implicit level that we can call “space and time” or ‘world”. “Joint attention” may be a very intensive way of *sharing the world*, but of course it is not world in itself that is the shared object of our attention. What becomes thematised and a topic of speech is something specific within the world. “Joint attention” is a practice that presupposes shared reference but also that both parties are *in the same world*. However, “world” – as a limitless environment within which we all find ourselves - is pre-thematically presupposed in “joint attention”. As such, it cannot itself come directly to speech. We cannot “refer” to a limitless environment since what is unlimited cannot be set beside anything else: it cannot itself be pointed to and rendered thematic. It cannot itself be placed within an ordered field of reference. Here we can begin to see the force of Yang’s argument that we need to address more than the capacity of language to refer, but also its capacity not to refer, *as language*. This is the importance of Derrida’s advocacy of learning “how not to speak” and of avoiding “this or that discursive, logical, rhetorical mode” in the act of speaking.[[11]](#footnote-11) Language can be present, and we can be performatively present in language, through learning to use language non-discursively, or in a non-controlling manner. It is here, in its pre-thematic usage, that language signals our deepest commonalities as human beings, rather than as these particular human beings who share *this* history and *this* culture. “Joint reference” as shared history and culture is not undesirable in any sense, but it is potentially only a limited form of human cooperation to the extent that it can also commonly be the ground of alienation and conflict between different societies whose memories and cultures may be competitively aligned.

Niche Construction

This deeper, pre-thematic level of belonging invites us to introduce a further term here. “Niche construction” is arguably the most important concept to emerge from the recent revolution in evolutionary science which has replaced the orthodoxy of Neo-Darwinism (also known as the “modern synthesis”). The so called ‘extended evolutionary synthesis’ (or EES) replaces the Neo-Darwinian emphasis on natural selection and random genetic variation with a very different account of how life on earth develops. Above all, it places an emphasis on the kinds of mutual influence that take place between a living organism (which moves and has a complex chemical structure) and its environment. These naturally occurring interactions in some degree shape both organism and environment *before natural selection comes into effect*. Moreover, natural selection operates on the live organism within an environment, and not directly upon the genes (there is a highly complex relation between genes, as they are understood today, and the actual behavioural features of the live animal or “phenotype”). And very significantly perhaps, EES notes the priority of a “developmental plasticity” or “developmental bias” within the relation between organisms and their environment. Organisms adapt more quickly than they should, in purely statistical terms, to environmental conditions. This is a relation which is not determined purely by random variation (though this has its part to play) but on what appears to be the innate propensity of life to move towards more complex forms, within naturally occurring interactions.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The concept of “niche construction” is extended to all forms of life, and it can be summarized as the innate capacity of life to make itself at home on our planet. But it takes a unique form in human beings. It is our capacity to connect with one another, and so to build cooperative, communicative relations, through what anthropologists call “hypercooperation” with one another, which is the bedrock of how we make ourselves “at home” in the world. And arguably it is this depth and range of our cooperation which is most distinctive about us as human beings in all sentient life. “Joint attention” presupposes a common world of referential meanings: it poses memory as history and hope, with its future orientation. Where there is “joint attention”, there is a shared narrative of problems and achievements, shared hopes as well as disappointments. The concept of niche construction lies much deeper than “joint attention” however, since it includes the non-self-aware life of the body as well as our conscious life. More exactly, it asks us to think in new ways precisely about the relation between our conscious self-awareness and the deep life of the human body. After all, the mind observes and in some sense stands “outside” the world, while it is through the body’s intensively socialized and socializing life that we are rooted in the world.

Niche construction then points to a fundamental dynamic that lie deeper than “perspective”, since this term, based on “looking” (Latin: *specere*), presupposes the priority of consciousness (its sixteenth century use as *prospettiva* in Italian art history indicates the innovative techniques which led to the appearance of pictorial distance or depth[[13]](#footnote-13)). What contemporary neuroscience confirms however is that we already very deeply belong in the world before consciousness is activated. Moreover, this belonging is not just a matter of instincts and drives, as is commonly thought. It is also a question of our powers of reasoning or “evaluation”. Our bodies have evolved to read the high-speed communications of other bodies with us, in ways that lay the foundation for alliances, friendships and other forms of common action, as we go about constructing the human “niche” together. Since making highly accurate evaluative discernments about the motivations of the other, and the viability of our relations with them, is key to our capacity to build our niche, natural selection has ensured that high level processes of social evaluation of the human other are at the centre of our embodied life. This is not discernment as the deliberative or free judgment of our advanced linguistic consciousness, but it is powerful evaluative discernment nevertheless. This includes the capacity to combine incommensurable sources of knowledge about the other (“live” inputs on the one hand and received, second-hand information on the other), through maintaining an open process of interactive evaluation.

“Joint reference” presupposes the priority of visual and other forms of conscious perception. The human social cognition or social bonding system, however, operates at speeds and at a density which lie beneath the threshold of conscious perceiving. Reasoning is something we associate in particular with the “free power of deliberative judgment” which is intrinsic to our all-seeing, self-aware linguistic consciousness. But neuroscience shows us that “reasoning” in the sense of social evaluation already exists in a powerful, pre-linguistic form before deliberative, linguistic consciousness becomes aware of it.[[14]](#footnote-14) We experience this evaluation consciously as an intuition or “feeling” about the human other. Today then we have to understand this as an invitation of our own body to come to meet it, as separated linguistic consciousness. For us to do that, as self-awareness, is for us implicitly to renounce the controlling function of consciousness: a function which evolved to reduce the complexity of the world, through discursive knowledge and the pursuit of self-interest, and thus to make the world more manageable. Our body’s prompting, on the other hand, is an invitation to *accept* the complexity of the world, as we encounter it in the human other, and to do so with the unconditionality of friendship or close bonding. We can say at this point that, paradoxically, our own body inserts itself between our separated consciousness and the body of the human other, so that in receiving the one we also receive the other. Here then at the point where the social mind and social body become one, we find, in a scientific version, an outline of what Yang Huilin means by the realization of the unity of *zhi* **(知)** as ‘knowing’ and *xing* **(行)** as “application”, in the light of *ti yong yi yuan* 体用一源 or the principle that “substance and embodiment have one source”.

Participative Sense-making

This configuration of an “in-between” – the space between persons – as the potential place for the emergence of a new kind of mind-body unity, in the practice of human bonding, lays the foundation for our third key term: “participative sense-making”. This was first generated in the enactivist school of the neurology of social cognition, and it refers precisely to the defining dynamic social cognition system, which is that one body intelligently and interactively reads another.[[15]](#footnote-15) The account of the human that is suggested by this phrase seems markedly different from many of the dominant paradigms we have had in the West, in recent times. It does not stress the separateness of the self from the world, or our cognitive autonomy. It firmly states rather the extent to which we are inseparably *in* the world but are so precisely in terms of our most basic form of cognition, which is social. This is not the cognition of our self-aware consciousness therefore, by which we are an ‘external’ and controlling observer. Rather it is the kind of cognition we do as social participant, in close encounter, whereby evaluating body and self-aware mind become one.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Illumined by contemporary science, this moment of personal cognitive interaction between human beings – our “participative sense-making” of each other – has two distinctive features. In the first place it marks the potential of the closing of the deep tension that exists between embodiment and consciousness. Evolutionary anthropology suggests that our social cognition system is ancient while our advanced linguistic consciousness appears very late in our evolution, and is mediated by the advanced tool manufacture and use we associate with the African techno-complexes of the later period of anatomically modern human beings (c. 50,000 years ago).[[17]](#footnote-17) In addition to the different *functions* of the social cognition system on the one hand and our advanced linguistic consciousness on the other (i.e. in the former the body’s social reasoning serves to embrace complexity while in the latter the theoretical, and practical, self-interested forms of reasoning of consciousness serve to reduce it), we can see that there is also an *evolutionary gap* in play here. It is this “gap” that is traversed when, as advanced linguistic consciousness, we accept the vulnerability of our contingent and mortal embodiment. This occurs where we allow the body’s early, pre-thematic, participative, social reasoning within the irreducible complexity of the encounter with the human other, to also become our own late, conscious, responsible and free reasoning. Human wholeness pivots around the integration of time. The practice of social bonding, which is primary – if not the primary - human activity, is also the acceptance and practice of our own human becoming.

The second way in which science illumines the practice of social bonding is in terms of what we can call the ontology of the “in-between”. Since we inevitably experience the space between people in terms of an interacting “me” and “you”, it is natural that we should personalize this “in-between”. But neuroscience shows that the “in-between” is as much “world” as it is “me” and “you”. The enactivist school of thought emphasizes the extent to which the reflex systems which constitute our pre-thematic, pre-linguistic interpersonal communications themselves constitute the enactment of the world. In other words, this is a pre-personal space of pure, interrelational, material density. It is the dense, material ground of our subjectivity and mutuality. Our social cognition which is based in the motor system with its pre-thematic, automatic or reflex responses, presents an ambiguous ontology therefore. From one perspective, which is that of the self who sees and speaks, it is the ground of our personal subjectivity. From the perspective of the neurologist however, it can be described as a physical event in the world which is prior to the separation of modern consciousness. So powerfully determined are we by the experience of being “me” in the presence of “you”, that we are startled when a scientific perspective sees what is prior to that inter-subjectivity: the pre-thematic ground which is describable as world.

Here we are confronted by a deeply significant fact. If Prof. Yang is dealing with multiple perspectives, that of Ricci and Foucault for instance, who share a common focus on Epictetus, and if he is inviting his reader to enter the further perspective which he himself constructs in his discussion of Ricci and Foucault, so that the reader can share a way of understanding new possibilities of East-West dialogue in this layered picture, then we must now add to this a further perspectival innovation. This is the perspective of the neurologist who is able to access – through technical extensions of sight – those dimensions of our embodiment which are otherwise always hidden from view, from the perspective of our consciousness. We cannot directly see the pre-thematic, but we can indirectly see it, where technology is able to accurately represent it to the living gaze.

This perspectival innovation can claim to see what is real, and *within* us, beyond the conventional parameters of sight. As we have seen, one of the possible consequences of laying bare this structure of the body’s intensive, participatory social evaluation on the one hand and the diverse capacities for deliberative reasoning of our advanced linguistic consciousness on the other, is that when our conscious reasoning reconciles itself with complexity – in the social complexity of the encounter with the human other – we can note the occurrence of a kind of integration of mind and body which closely corresponds to Yang Huilin’s emphasis upon the unity of *zhi* **(知)** as ‘knowing’ and *xing* **(行)** as ‘application’. But we can take a further step, on the grounds of the scientific perspective set out in this section. We can suggest that this unity brings about a deeper level of integration, beyond that of mind and body. Since the “in-between” is describable as world, for the neurologist, we can also read the integration of mind and body, through social reasoning, as the integration of mind in world. In a sense here we see the conscious mind that reasons socially *becoming* world. Furthermore, the mutuality that is implicit in the “in-between” suggests that this process of “mind becoming world” can further be read as the emergence of something new, which is to say the emergence of world as it is distinctively *shared*.

The suggestion, in the light of this scientific perspective, that human bonding can be understood to be the transformation of the “in-between” through the emergence of a “shared world” within the “in-between” leaves us with the question of what this might mean in terms of our second concept of “niche construction”, which underlies “joint attention”? Ordinarily this term denotes the visible, behavioural ways in which we make ourselves at home on this planet. Niche construction points to human flourishing and viability and to our human ‘hypercooperation’, securing our future together. It may well be that the processes of integration outlined here – of mind with body, and mind with world, through the engagement of our own body with the body of another – describe the internal structure of hypercooperation and so also of niche construction. Perhaps the human niche is constructed first of all in the “in-between” at the point where our advanced linguistic consciousness freely accepts our own body’s social reasoning, in the encounter with the body of the other, and so brings to the unconditionality and power of those open and pre-thematic processes of evaluation, the mind’s gift of freedom?

Summary

In this paper we have responded to Prof. Yang’s multi-layered perspectivalism which has at its heart a constructive concern with the hermeneutics of East-West relations and the development of dialogue within what he calls simultaneously “intra- and interlingual contexts”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Strictly speaking, the scientific perspective outlined here which captures the dynamics that underlie “joint attention”, cannot be accommodated within either the intra-lingual or inter-lingual contexts of Yang’s thought. Arguably, as a fundamental perspective of “species-wide” human features, it knows nothing of these distinctions. And so the question arises: what can the introduction of this scientific perspective contribute to Yang’s discussion? And if it can make a contribution, then what might the relevance of that be for future engagements with questions of East-West relations, with respect to both processes and outcomes?

It goes without saying that a fundamental perspective can easily become hegemonic, casting aside all other perspectives, or otherwise “reducing” them to its own necessary limits. Scientific narratives are notoriously reductionist. Let it be clear that we reject this. At the same time, there is a distinction to be made between a fundamental perspective of niche construction, for instance, in all its pre-thematic depth, and the conscious perspectivalism of “joint attention”. We need to ask then what might have changed, if anything, through the reflections introduced in this paper? To cast this in slightly different terms, we need to ask whether and in what way a scientific perspective which lays bare the hidden or invisible, might potentially make a difference. Can it for instance be humanly transformational, precisely at the level of conscious and cultural perspectivalism, which is where we are – as mind – most at home?

If a direct and disruptive intervention by this fundamental perspective on the human into the careful, hermeneutical layering of Yang’s composition is to be wholly ruled out, as a reductive transgression of the laws of perspective, then what remains is the possibility of a *re-contextualization*. The fundamental nature of the scientific perspective means that the various implicit and explicit “higher-level” arguments of his paper are in varying degrees “placed” within a broader context. We can explain this in the following terms.

Ricci and Foucault both show a preference for what we might call today a rigorously non-dualist understanding of the human, or one reflecting what Max Velmans has called “reflexive monism”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Yang gives every indication that he too is of this persuasion. The opposing arguments for dualism, or moderated dualism, are implied though not developed. In its focus on Epictetus’ *Encheiridion*, the paper declares an advocacy for ‘self-cultivation’ as a process of moral learning within action. However, its truly dialogical moment turns on the resonance between Ricci and Foucault as each reaches, for different though intertwining reasons, to the same Stoic tradition of an integrated act and learning (Ricci since it will recommend his Christian work to the Chinese, and Foucault since it contests the canonically Western Cartesianism[[20]](#footnote-20)). It is this resonance that Yang artfully places within the context of East-West dialogue in his paper, as an implicit appeal – as I read it - to the possibility that the Chinese phrase concerning the ‘unity of knowing and application’ (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一) may point to a hitherto unconsidered possibility or resource for a new level of dialogue. If Ricci knew that, and if Foucault follows Ricci (albeit unknowingly), then there must be a good case for the view that this could be a significant point of contact between East and West, even perhaps constituting a new methodology for conducting positive dialogue.

But two quite different things are in play here. Firstly, there is Yang’s quoting of these phrases, drawn from classical Chinese literature, which invite the reader to consider that such a thing might be thinkable (“let’s think about ….”). But secondly, there is the underlying sense of his conviction that such a state, such a resource, this “meaning structure” as a calls it, actually exists. Yang communicates to us as someone who is *experientially* internal to the Chinese tradition. And so we are left then with the familiar separation between a Western reader, who may discern notionally what Yang is saying while sharing little of his sense of the potential reality or realization of that unity of knowledge and application which is in general markedly more characteristic of the Chinese tradition than it is in the Western one.

This is a familiar and seemingly unresolvable impasse. This material looks very different according to whether we are Chinese or Western. And whichever we are, that tradition and way of seeing things will seem natural. The challenge of cultural difference, of perspectivalism, in the inter-cultural dialogue between East and West, asserts itself once again.

THE SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE AND THE FUTURE OF EAST-WEST DIALOGUE

What then might a scientific re-contextualisation of this dialogue mean, as presented by Prof. Yang in this paper? We have provided the elements of that in our central section, where “joint attention”, “niche construction” and “participative sense-making” all play a role. These words are dispensable though they are not in any way random. Each can claim some resilient, epistemic link back to the data sets which are the bedrock of this new scientific knowledge. They are therefore viable ways of representing real, invisible structures which belong to our human embodiment, to the humanity we share, Chinese and Westerner alike. They point to the primary evolutionary structures which have shaped and continue to shape the fashioning of our human cultures.

The challenge for the neurologist, evolutionary anthropologist and philosopher alike is to find a language in which to speak of these structures as they slowly come into view. “Niche construction” and “participative sense-making” are terms that have only recently been coined. The ambiguous ontology of the ‘”in-between” has only recently come into view. The ad hoc term “social reasoning” fails to capture the intensity of moral feeling and reasoning in combination, embedded in the senses, which is its signature. Furthermore, if we are here at the beginnings of what may well turn out to be a second scientific revolution, not now of *homo faber* but rather of *homo socius*, then the question of our relation to technology, in the light of this new social self-understanding, may well arise. It was Paul Ricoeur who regretted the fact that we are so much better at critically understanding material objects in the world leading to technology than we are at critically understanding ourselves as material embodied subjects.[[21]](#footnote-21) What might be the implications for such an enhancement of *homo socius* with respect to our capacity to humanize technology and its uses today?

We cannot ask the question of what kind of contextualisation this new science of human sociality might offer the East-West dialogue, without considering at least briefly the history of science in East and West. The case in the West is a very particular one. Unlike Chinese history, which tends to be divided in a seamless linearity along dynastic lines, Western history, with its “pre-modern”, “early modern”, “modern” and indeed “post-modern” periods characteristically looks to the ending of the Middle Ages as the axial point in historical Western identity. The reason for this is straightforward. From the early sixteenth century, around the time of the first flush of the European Reformation, the findings of early natural science began to circulate among the Reformers, who were poised dramatically to change European culture, society and politics, and the European landscape. Specifically, the definition of a material object as necessarily “circumscribed, limited and particular” first appears in a polemical text written by the radical Reformer Zwingli in 1528.[[22]](#footnote-22) Zwingli is concerned with the central proclamation of Christian faith that Christ rose from the dead and that his living body is real. For the medieval tradition it made sense to affirm that his body, which is in heaven, is a *glorified* body. According to Catholic sacramental tradition, it is the glorified or heavenly state of the body of Jesus which allows him to be both present in the Eucharist and yet still in heaven above. Zwingli was adamant that if Christians are credibly to affirm that Jesus still lives, then they must cease to claim also that he is in a transformed or glorified state. Zwingli tells us that Jesus is real and sits beside the Father in heaven in a “wholly untransformed” state.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Zwingli fails to persuade Luther, who preferred the authority of the scriptural version, but right at the outset of the Reformation, the power of science to revise fundamental areas of Christian belief – precisely those which concern the nature of matter (the matter we *are* as embodied human beings) – becomes apparent. The widespread conclusion among the Reformers over time was that science should not be resisted but rather “accommodated”. This meant firstly that there was a turn to the human subject of faith (and away from Jesus as object), and then later to language and the Bible as the narration of faith. In modern Europe, the pictures of Christ in glory, which dominate many if not the majority of the surviving pre-modern Churches, became illegible.

But the immense, existential impact of the new definition of matter on the West specifically as a Christian civilisation, also led over time to a broader and deeper concern with understanding the consequences of the rise of scientific reason. It led to a far reaching “accommodation” of science but also an equally strong reaction against science, as society divided into sceptics, empiricists, Idealists and Romantics. But two things are clear. Firstly, the rapid rise of technology and its associated industrialization placed *homo faber* at the centre of modern society and at the heart of our increasingly global Western identity. But if contemporary evolutionary science tells us today that we are both *homo socius* and *homo faber*, then our Western Enlightenment philosophies and our experience of rapid industrialization in fact led to a pronounced cultural enhancement of *homo faber*. And this had a further consequence. Inevitably, people came to think that *homo faber* defines us as human beings to the exclusion (or relative exclusion) of *homo socius*. Rather than understanding that science was not yet capable of laying bare our extreme social complexity, we have allowed ourselves in the West to mistakenly allow ourselves to be defined as *homo faber*. Of course, since in reality the human body has evolved to be fundamentally social, we did not cease to be deeply social in practice – among family and friends –even as we allowed ourselves to be extensively defined by the technologies we produce and use. But the imposition through a scientistic culture of this separation or alienation led to the loss of the possibility of a properly integrated narrative of the human. The lack of such a narrative may well have contributed to the marked tendencies towards division in the contemporary world, arguably reflecting not so much an inability to form social identities as their disordered multiplication.

At the heart of the Western history very briefly sketched above is the powerful form of reasoning we can call “theoretical”, which is the scientific reasoning of the *observer* intent upon *understanding* the world. This is a reasoning that reduces the world’s complexity to make it more manageable. It contrasts greatly with our social reasoning however, by which we reason as *participants* in the world. Here we have to accept the world’s complexity, through our encounter with the infinitely complex human other. In our dealings with other human beings, we have to refuse the reduction of complexity if we are not to find that we are instrumentalizing other human beings. Instrumentalization of the human other is socially disadvantageous. This social reasoning, in the light of the new science of our human sociality, appears to play a central role in body, life and world. It represents a very powerful mode of “integrated” reasoning, combining “feeling”, “intuition”, “emotion” and high level evaluation, which becomes in our free, decision-making consciousness very distinctively a system of *communitarian deep recognition*: enhanced and compassionate deliberative judgments made for and with the human other. We have to ask the question then: how can a Western world, tuned – both positively and negatively - for some three hundred years to a different kind of science, now quickly learn to discern a different melody?

And what does this history of science in the West mean for China, within the East-West dialogue with which Yang is concerned? The first thing we learn from it is that the encounter with science can define a civilization. The key issue here though is whether the new science intersects *existentially* with a civilization. It can do that by challenging a civilization very forcefully as “pre-modern” Christian Europe was challenged by the new humanist definition of matter, leading to extensive “accommodations”. Alternatively, it can do so by discovering in the new science its own image. It can be an encounter through *recognition*. Such recognition may not be dynamic however in the sense that the Western experience was dynamic and existential. But what we further learn from the Western case is that an encounter with science can have truly global implications. Scientific knowledge is not local but universal knowledge. Perhaps a China concerned with adjusting to its new global role in the world, will not just recognize significant elements of its own traditions here, but will also discover an existential edge in the application of this new knowledge in the contexts of its present and future international social, economic and political roles?

And so we return to Prof. Yang and to our re-contextualization of his artful, multi-layered, perspectival composition of an East-West dialogue, based on the unity of “*Zhi*” (知Knowing) and “*Xing*” (行Application). His primary tools are those of a craftsman who wishes to open up new avenues of thought, new possibilities of imagining, through referencing the “intra-lingual and inter-lingual” flows that come into view through the co-positioning of Ricci, Foucault and Epictetus. Since our re-contextualization here is scientific, and its articulation at this point provisionary, it is inappropriate – as we have indicated – not to observe a strong boundary between the scientific section of the present paper and Yang’s work. That distance must be respected. And yet in terms of temporality, there is indeed a strong and authentic connection.

Yang speaks of “a thousand years of transformation”, in Foucault’s phrase, pointing to the long term nature of this investigation. In cultural terms, with the evocation of the Stoic Epictetus, we are close to *cultural* deep-time. Foucault, Ricci and Yang all understand that the distance and difference that comes with time is a strong hermeneutical resource. The notion of tradition allows commonality and so also the possibility of learning from the past. Such learning from within traditions and from between traditions, over time, can be a significant form of human enrichment.

But the new science too plays with time and learning. It gives access to what we could not previously see. And so time here is on the edge of *geological* time, as it evokes landscapes of two million years ago when the human species was forming (evoking too the history of human traits which takes us back more than seven million years to shared ancestors with other primates). One of the characteristics of the new science is that it teaches us to recognize the presence of time within us, as an integral part of who we are, as modern genus *Homo*. An expanded dimension of time offers hitherto unseen and unsuspected possibilities of learning about our foundational humanity.

It is in this sense then that our scientific account re-contextualizes Prof. Yang’s project. It offers a deeper temporal context for thinking about the principle that “*Zhi*” and “*Xing*” are or can be one. The weight of evolutionary and neurological evidence is in favour. A scientific evaluation also looks to the longevity of Chinese traditions as potential evidence for the view that they may be more deeply embedded in the human body, and in its most innate forms of social bonding, than other less resilient forms of cultural identity. And here we can make a comparison with technology. Good theoretical reasoning skilfully applied is evidenced in technology that works. But in a parallel way, viable human communities which have sustained themselves over millennia – our world religions come to mind – can be taken as evidence that skilful social reasoning has been practiced countless times, in concrete contexts of social particularity.

In short then, Prof. Yang, with his subtle project of deepening historical and hermeneutical reflections on perspective, in response to the needs of our own day, may nevertheless have time on his side.

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1. Yang Huilin, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus: A Quest of ‘*Zhi*’ (知Knowing) and ‘*Xing*’ (行Application)”, JSCC, 00. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yang, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus”, 00 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kristofer Schipper refers to this dynamic of “return” with the term “involution” in his study *The Taoist Body* (Berkley, University of California Press, 1993), 158. He links it with the notion of “sacrifice”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006). See also Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology* (Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e), 2008). This was the first French translation of Kant’s text. For the Romantic influence, see also Michael N. Forster, ‘Kant's Philosophy of Language’, *Tijdschrift voor Filosophie, 74*, 2012), 485-511. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yang, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus”, 00 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yang, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus”, 00 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A good introduction to “joint attention” is Peter Mundy and Lisa Newell, ‘Attention, Joint Attention, and Social Cognition’, *Current directions in psychological science,* 2007, 16: 269-74. See also Naomi Eilan, Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack and Johannes Roessler, eds., *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mundy and Newell, ‘Attention, Joint Attention, and Social Cognition’, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yang, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus”, 00 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The founding text of niche construction is John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland, Markus W. Feldman, *Niche construction : the neglected process in evolution* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003). An authoritative recent survey of EES is Kevin N. Laland, Tobias Uller, Marcus W. Feldman, Kim Sterelny, Gerd B. Müller, Armin Moczek, Eva Jablonka, and John Odling-Smee, 'The extended evolutionary synthesis: its structure, assumptions and predictions', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, 2015, 282:20151019. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=perspective&allowed_in_frame=0> (accessed 30/5/17). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The same brain area, the medial prefrontal cortex, is recruited in both pre-thematic and thematic social reasoning. On this theme, see Earl K. Miller, David J. Freedman, and Jonathan D. Wallis, 'The prefrontal cortex: categories, concepts and cognition', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences*, 2002, 357: 1123. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ezequiel di Paulo and Hanne de Jaegher, 'The interactive brain hypothesis', *Front Hum Neurosci*, 2012, 6: 163: 2. See also Hanne de Jaegher, Hanne, and Ezequiel di Paolo, 'Participatory sense-making', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2007, 6: 485-507. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. L. Schilbach, B. Timmermans, V. Reddy, A. Costall, G. Bente, T. Schlicht, and K. Vogeley, ‘Toward a second-person neuroscience', *Behav Brain Sci*, 2013, 36: 393-414. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. D. Stout, 'Stone toolmaking and the evolution of human culture and cognition', *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci*, 2011, 366: 1050-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yang, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Reading of Epictetus”, 00 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness* (Routledge: London, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Paul Ricoeur, ‘Phenomenology and Hermeneutics’, *Nous*, 1975, 9(1), 85-102 (here 89-91). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Über D. Martin Luthers Buch, Bekenntnis gennant”, *Huldrich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke* (Corpus Reformatorum, Vol. 93, 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “Antwort über Straussens Büchlein, das Nachtmahl Christi betreffend”, *Huldrich Zwinglis*

    *Sämtliche Werke* (Corpus Reformatorum, Vol. 92, 828-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)