

## *Beyond Dualism: A Review of Mind and Body in Early China*

---

JAMES D. SELLMANN

University of Guam, USA (jsellmann@triton.uog.edu)

Edward Slingerland. *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism*. Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 385, USD 35.

*This book rightly argues for greater inclusion of the natural and social sciences in the humanities, especially philosophy. The author draws from psychology, especially folk psychology, to show that a basic trait of universal human cognition contains a form of weak dualism. It is a dualism based on the embodied awareness that one's own thoughts are different from external objects, which generates the belief in a mind/body dualism. The book offers a great deal of evidence that the ancient Chinese embraced a weak mind/body dualism. The author criticizes most philosophers who have proposed a mind/body holism. Because the author admits that correlative thinking is also a function of universal human cognition, I propose that what he refers to as weak mind/body dualism is actually a form of mind/body nondualism. The book cites many examples of how cross-culturally people depict the disembodied spirit in a spiritual-bodily or ghostly-apparition form. The author of this review argues that dualism is another form of the Orientalism that the book wants to avoid, and one way to avoid Orientalism-dualism would be to embrace the correlative, nondual mind/body relationship.*

**Key words:** Orientalism; mind and body; dualism vs. holism; correlative thinking; humanities; science

Edward Slingerland presents his latest ventures into digital humanities with *Mind and Body in Early China*, which brings together almost two decades of previous work. The book is composed of three parts. After three pages of acknowledgments, some notes on translations, and the introduction, the book contains six chapters, followed by a conclusion, bibliography references, and a helpful index.

### 1 Mind and Body Dualism

Slingerland immediately advances a historical assault on the Orientalism found in early European commentators like Montesquieu and Hegel through twentieth-century scholars like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Granet. He vehemently attacks what he calls the “Neo-Orientalism” found in the work of living sinologists such as Tang Yijie, Zhang Xuezi, Roger T. Ames, and François Jullien, because they allegedly propagate the myth of holism in the study of early China. He also takes on many other scholars in his attempt to correct their purportedly misguided methods and interpretations of Chinese culture, especially their interpretation of mind and body holism, cultural essentialism that generates cultural incommensurability. He is not clear about how Neo-Orientalism differs from Orientalism except that it is a twentieth-century development, calling it “Hegel with a smile” (2). Citing the work of Zhang Longxi and Michael Puett, Slingerland builds a case against the myth of holism in Orientalist interpretations of China. He proposes that there

is a great sense of urgency to reclaim the correct multi- and interdisciplinary, scientific method that, he argues, the humanities must embrace to remain viable and significant for the academy and the general public.

Slingerland's writing style, his blending of scientific and emotional appeals, will likely captivate some readers. For example, consider the conclusion to his introduction.

I feel strongly that comparative religion, Asian studies, and cultural studies more generally, are in active danger unless we can put radical social constructivism and anti-scientism behind us. Under their influence, our rhetorical styles and modes of engaging with evidence have diverged not only from the sciences but also from the general public. The way out of the 'crisis' in the humanities is not retrenchment, defensiveness, or superciliousness but rather deeper engagement with the broader academy and general public. [. . .]. At the most general level, however, my argument is that humanities scholars should make more of an effort to raise their heads above the parapets of their individual disciplines, and even the core humanities themselves, to see how their specialist knowledge fits into the broader framework of scholarly and human knowledge. And we need to do so sooner rather than later if we feel that the humanities are meaningful, useful, and worthy of our most enthusiastic support, as they surely are (20-1).

Below I will have more to say about the misuse of figurative and emotional language. Here I suggest that the readers apply a self-referential test by cross-checking what the author says he claims to do against his own rhetorical style. The readers might direct their attention to his rhetorical style, which is less than scientific, impartial, or neutrally objective, and more like a post-modern narrative approach. That is, the author advocates for the use of impartial scientific evidence while attacking post-modernism, but his rhetoric is emotional, not scientific.

The subtitle for chapter 2, "Soul and Body," is "The Traditional Archaeological and Textual Evidence for Soul-Body Dualism." Slingerland draws from a large body of scientific archaeological evidence and its qualitative interpretations about many ancient peoples around the world, and especially those around the Yellow River Valley and the coastal region of what is now called China, to establish that there is a universal human cognition of a conscious-soul and body dualism. He uses the dated expression "ancestor worship" rather than the more contemporary term "ancestor veneration" to build his case. The first example given is from the Yangshao period (c. 5000-4000 BCE) of a "[...] pottery coffin that is pierced by a hole drilled in its side, interpreted by many as a portal through which the soul could exist or move in and out of the burial pot" (67). After presenting many more examples from interpretations of archaeological findings, such as the oracle bone divination used to contact deceased ancestors for guidance, he turns to textual evidence to corroborate the claims that pre-Qin cultures made the departed ancestors drunk with alcohol or tell of how a spirit of the ancestor, Dan Zhu, possessed the body of a living man to have intercourse with Queen Fang who gave birth to King Mu (77-8): "The dead and other spirits seem to have been conceived of as human beings without bodies (or possessing only very tenuous and invisible bodies) who, nonetheless, were interacted with in a manner modeled upon ordinary social interactions because of their continued possession of minds and personal essence" (77). Notice that the statement contains caveats and qualifications, leading one to wonder what kind of dualism it is, if the dead *seem* to have *unseen bodies*? He continues to build the case for dualism with a detailed analysis of the term *shen* 神, the spirit-soul-sentient-consciousness, or the mysterious supernatural numinous (87). Slingerland goes on to argue that there are similarities between these alleged Chinese ideas of transcendent numinosity and the God of the Hebrew Bible and Christian theology (97-9). Given these cross-cultural similarities, Slingerland concludes that these dualistic features are not unique to early Chinese religions, proposing that other cultures held differing or similar views on how the supernatural

and natural worlds are connected. He claims that the two realms are never “entirely hermetically sealed off,” and that Cartesian mind-body dualism, like strong natural-supernatural dualism are incoherent (98-9). His description sounds more like correlative nondualism than weak dualism.

In chapter 3, “Mind-Body Dualism in the Textual Record,” Slingerland analyzes in detail the term *xin* 心, which he wants to translate as “mind,” as the seat of cognition and moral emotions. He argues vehemently against any kind of holistic interpretation that translates *xin* as the heart-mind that interprets the cognitive processes to be identified with the heart in the body. Oddly, because Slingerland wants scholars to draw upon other disciplines, he does not mention the mind-brain identity theory in contemporary philosophical and psychological discussions concerning the mind-body relationship, which posits that the mind is identical to the brain. Psychologists have been arguing for some time that the brain is the bodily organ responsible for cognition. Following Edmund Husserl, phenomenologists also argue that consciousness is always embodied. The Yoga school has proposed for many centuries that there is no mind without the body and no body without the mind. Instead of grappling with psychology and the philosophy of phenomenology or Yoga, Slingerland deploys the distant reading of pre-Qin, especially Warring States, texts to show that the *xin* as the seat of human cognition is only vaguely connected to the body. Slingerland offers his qualitative interpretation of numerous passages, arguing that the *xin* only has a questionable relationship to the body or other organs, including the heart. He proposes that the mind or *xin* is in some sense metaphysical and free from physical limitations. Slingerland concludes that pre-Qin writers think of the mind as being somewhat immaterial, different from other bodily organs, and the seat of free will, moral judgments, reason, and self-identity. Therefore, these texts must have been written by people who embraced, at least implicitly, a weak form of dualism.

To further support the claim that the Chinese texts contain dualistic thinking, he uses advanced techniques of digital humanities. In part II, chapter 4, “Embracing the Digital Humanities: New Methods for Analyzing Texts and Sharing Scholarly Knowledge,” he explores the advantages of computer-generated data used for the “distant reading” of texts, and how scholars may use online databases to share their newly found information and interpretations from entire cultural corpora. This chapter is presented as the proper means of using word collocation and hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) to support the thesis of the previous chapter that mind-body dualism is the predominate focus of early Chinese texts, and the results of the topic modeling suggest that *xin* is the seat of reason, “higher cognition,” but now it does not include the emotions. Even though statistical fallacies are taught in many critical thinking, informal, and formal logic classes, Slingerland holds the view that humanities scholars, like the general public, are for some reason unacquainted with and unaccustomed to using statistics (261 note 1). First, the most basic quantitative methods of textual analysis are offered. Then, the more sophisticated methods of word collocation, HCA, and topic modeling are introduced with the results presented in the form of 13 figures, 4 tables, and 1 world map. Drawing from the Database of Religious History (DRH), the world map depicts the regions that show from only 149 answers to the question “Is a spirit-body distinction present?” that the dominate reply is “yes” at 87%, the answer “no” at 5%, and the “data field does not know” at 7%. When data confirms what people think, the critical thinker wonders if the data confirms new knowledge or merely repeats the conjecture of the researcher. I wonder what the results would be if the question were framed in a correlative thinking manner such as, “Does the soul or spirit of the dead have a subtle bodily form?” When people claim to see ghosts, spirits, or gods, they describe them in a bodily form. Slingerland laments that the DRH is not yet a reliable research source because only a few experts have entered data there, so he encourages junior scholars to make it a normative practice to publish their findings on the DRH, obtaining a DOI number to build their curriculum vita (206). In concluding the chapter, Slingerland counters criticisms claiming that digital humanities are an administrators’ ploy to divest scholars of their salary and intellectual

value. He proposes that scholars must retrain students and themselves to stop making qualitative generalizations that are not supported by quantitative data. Part II concludes the “internal” evidence against the strong mind-body holism thesis, proposing that a strong mind-body holism must be laid to rest. A brief preview of the “external” evidence from the cognitive sciences is offered to further nail tight the coffin of the holistic position, at least for those who consider themselves “evidence-based scholars” (215).

In Part III, chapter 5, “Hermeneutical Constraints: Minds in Our Bodies and Our Feet on the Ground,” Slingerland offers a body of evidence from the cognitive sciences concerning folk psychology beliefs about the mind-body relationship based on the theory of mind (ToM). To be clear, this is not the study of neurology or brain science, but the findings of psychologists and philosophers who study what people believe about themselves and physical objects. Slingerland cites a corpus of cultural and cross-cultural studies to substantiate the claim that there is an innate universal human cognition that causes conscious agents with internal states of awareness, thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, will power, and so on to distinguish themselves from mere physical objects governed by cause and effect mechanisms. Slingerland notes some of the counterevidence: in one study, undereducated Brazilian subjects were more dualistic thinkers than educated subjects from the United Kingdom, who likely had been exposed to biomedical ideas of an integrated mind-body system; in another, undereducated rural Fijians held stronger beliefs in mind-body dualism than the more educated ones (236). He notes that, “Cultural context also appears to have a strong effect on people’s judgments concerning the identity and number of capacities that survive the death of the physical body” (236). This is a surprising statement because it is inconsistent with his attack on cultural essentialism. In concluding the chapter, Slingerland makes another interesting claim that,

[t]o the best of our knowledge, however, we are not disembodied ghosts but embodied, culture-bearing animals. Approaching a text as an embodied realist encourages us to take as our hermeneutic starting point what we can plausibly be said to understand about the human mind. Diving into the early Chinese corpus from this entry point, we will certainly find some surprises [...], but the general background landscape will be familiar. The relationship between body and mind is a fraught one. Something essential about a person leaves his or her body upon death. [...], the mind is free. It can range over the entire universe, consider a broad range of options, and is therefore the proper ruler of the self. Our universe is populated by anthropomorphic, supernatural beings [...]. These beings care about human affairs [...]. Early Chinese texts say all of this and modern readers immediately get it because we have very similar body-brain-culture systems. Effortlessness in comprehension conceals the profound depths of embodied commonality that make such comprehension possible. It is time to recognize this fact and to get our hermeneutic feet back on the ground (270).

What Slingerland means here is that embodied humans’ internal states of awareness and the folk ToM held by children and undereducated adults provide the familiar landscape for the belief in a mind that can be disembodied and then traverse the galaxies. The wording sounds as if he believes in supernatural beings, but he must mean that only those who are wedded to the folk psychology of the ToM hold these beliefs.

Chapter 6, “Hermeneutical Excess: Interpretative Missteps and the Essentialist Trap,” continues the argument against the alleged strong mind-body holism. The focus of this chapter is to explain why the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of “Sinologism” (a term coined by Bob Hodge and Kam Louie) persist. Slingerland claims that his own work is not immune from the excesses of “sinicity,” welcoming others to document them (271). He turns to discuss and expose a number of (mis)interpretations in the secondary literature that begin with a basic truth

that is commonly understood, and then proposes a slide into an alleged post-modernist, false claim about cultural essentialism, cultural incommensurability, denial of all forms of dualism, unwarranted assumptions or conclusions of east vs. west, or Euro-American vs. Chinese. He cites several instances in the literature, taking on many scholars as one example or another of these allegedly misguided views that he says must stop. In the course of exposing the slide from accepting one particular theory to overgeneralizing it as representative of a whole cultural tradition, Slingerland mentions how some scholars mistook correlative (yin-yang) thinking as a uniquely Chinese phenomenon. He praises A.C. Graham's work for noting that correlative thinking is part and parcel of all human proto-scientific thinking. Slingerland links correlative thinking to his notion of the universal human cognition, citing an important article on neurobiology.<sup>1</sup> Slingerland missed an important aspect of human cognition that solves his dilemma concerning how to describe people's beliefs about the mind and body relationship, that is, nondual logic or correlative thinking in which mind and body are always correlated. I say more about this in the conclusion. He claims that Graham does not justify the link between correlative thinking and language. This is not the case. Graham draws upon Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics to suggest the fit between correlative thinking and the function of language. Employing Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, Graham analyzes at length the latter's application of paradigm/syntagma and metaphor/metonym. You must appeal to your own experience to keep up with Graham's claims.

The last 11 pages of the chapter are devoted to discussing some of the dichotomies or differences between Euro-American and Chinese ways of thinking and philosophy without falling into the trap of essentializing cultures as incommensurable (296-307). For example, Slingerland agrees that aside from a few individualistic thinkers (Yang Zhu, the texts *Zhuangzi* and *Mengzi*) most pre-Qin thinkers focus on the social character of humans, and this flies in the face of modern liberal individualism that began with the male chauvinism of the Enlightenment philosophy in northern Europe. To avoid cultural essentialism, he cites Aristotle and several commentators as a counterexample against the "myth of the atomic individual," concluding that the difference is between northern European Enlightenment thinking versus ancient Greek and Chinese philosophies. Slingerland discusses similar misconceptions of the mind-body relationship, and the reason versus emotions dichotomy, and how to reconcile them without appealing to the alleged exaggerations of holism and cultural essentialism.

After proposing the out-of-Africa theory for human dispersal and that humans are an "extended biological family," Slingerland concludes the chapter saying, "[a]ny reasonable hermeneutic journey into a text or artifact from another culture must therefore start from the basic assumption that body-mind systems in, say, the Warring States region of Chu, emerged into the world with much of the same factory-installed cognitive equipment possessed by, say, modern Vancouver-based body-mind systems. Moreover, the physical cultural systems these minds created and came to interact with—though idiosyncratic in various respects, and to that extent unique, like all cultural systems or individuals—are not likely to have taken forms so radically sui generis as to constitute an incommensurable thought world. The key to tapping into the corrective insights and therapeutic vision of ancient or alternative traditions, then, is to do so while keeping one's hermeneutic feet firmly on the ground" (307).

In the "Conclusion: Naturalistic Hermeneutics and the End of Orientalism," Slingerland argues that scholars making cross-cultural comparisons ought to begin with the assumption of an embodied commonality among humans, employing methods and information from the natural sciences. The naturalistic hermeneutic is based on his ideas about universal cognition, folk psychology, the embodied commonality coupled with techniques and knowledge of science. Slingerland posits ways that the humanities can be taken seriously in the academy, if only post-modernism, linguistic and social constructivism, and the varieties of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism can be exterminated. This will allow Asian and Chinese studies to move out of an

intellectual ghetto and “engage with the broader academic world” (236). Slingerland hopes that this book will show scholars “[...] how a naturalistic hermeneutics, formulated in terms of embodied cognition and a dual-inheritance model of gene-culture coevolution, provides precisely [...]” the correct approach to “[...] move beyond cultural caricatures and Orientalist myths” (326). So that Chinese studies can be communicated to the wider academic community by combining the best of “[...] the sciences and the humanities is our most promising way forward” (326).

## 2 Conclusion and Criticisms

These are a few of the questions that come to mind in reading Slingerland’s book: Is the mind/body relationship monistic (holistic), dualistic, nondualistic, pluralistic, or a pseudo-relationship based on a pseudo-question due to a misuse of language? Is there only one universal human cognition and is it based on monism, dualism, or nondualistic correlative thinking? Is there an important difference between weak dualism and weak holism?

This book makes an important attempt to integrate advances in computer technology with the humanities. Scholars are encouraged to further develop the techniques of distant reading, word collocation, HCA, and internet databases. These tools will prove to be useful. The problem with the work is its rhetorical style and personal attacks.

Slingerland commits the fallacy of accident—illicitly applying a generalization to a specific case—when he uses the generalization that there is a mind-body distinction in the Chinese corpus, and then wants to correct particular interpretations of a specific text based on that generalization. We must consider what each text says in itself, not scan the whole body of literature and impose the generalization on a particular text. Each philosopher, each text has its perspective. The *Mengzi* and the *Zhuangzi* in particular hold an embodied view of the awareness. If we did a distant reading of neurology, brain science, psychology, and mind-brain identity theory texts and saw the word “brain” was used separately without reference or collocation to terms for the “body” or terms for other organs, and concluded that there was a brain-body dualism in neurology and identity theory, then we would be far from the mark of what those texts mean, because those theories are based on brain-consciousness being a bodily process.

Above I mention that when Slingerland accepts correlative thinking as a component of universal human cognition, he had a better answer to the dilemma concerning the mind-body relationship, namely, it is not a weak dualism, but rather it is a nondual, correlative relationship. That is, there are no minds without some sort of body, and there are no ideas about bodies without thinking minds. Like head and foot or night and day, mind and body entail each other as correlative aspects. If we begin with the nondual logic of correlative thinking and acknowledge that human languages describe alleged disembodied states of consciousness in physicalist, bodily terminology, then we grasp a better understanding of both human cognition and the human perception of the world of affordances. Many languages contain an etymological link between the concept of the soul-spirit to “breath, breathing air.” Just as the air or its powerful wind cannot be seen, it can be experienced, and its positive and negative effects are readily apparent in the sailboat moving or one’s house being destroyed. Why is there a hole drilled in the Yangshao pottery coffin mentioned in the second chapter? It is not because the spirit of the dead is a metaphysical immaterial substance, but rather because the spirit is still embodied in a more rarified bodily form similar to the air, such that it needs the hole to exit and enter the coffin. This kind of physical/bodily thinking dominates the afterlife views in many cultures. The archaeological and textual evidence points to a rarified embodied soul or spirit, not a disembodied metaphysical substance. The point is that the cross-cultural evidence of human cognition about the mind-body or soul-body relationship is not a weak dualism, but a nondual,

correlative relationship. By hanging on to the entrenched idea of dualism, Slingerland has not avoided northern European Enlightenment thinking.

In the humanities, scholars expect arguments to be expressed in neutral language. We are expected to avoid the fallacies of appeal to figurative and emotional language. It is one thing to take on most modern scholars in an attempt to set the record straight, but name-calling, claiming that individuals are “stupid” (297), and overgeneralizations about professors and all of their students and colleagues (289) are ad hominem attacks. After acknowledging the organic character of the mind-body relationship, to revert to mechanistic and factory metaphors (307) detracts from his point.

The study and the practice of philosophy are supposed to help people improve themselves and the human condition. For me the value of Slingerland’s book is that it contributes to the debate about the proper way to live, think, and understand the world and the mind/body relationship. It does not provide the final answers, but it will stimulate others to think deeply about the way they express themselves and how to better integrate the sciences into the humanities.

**James D. Sellmann** is Professor of Philosophy and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Guam. He specializes in Chinese and comparative philosophies, Micronesian Studies, and the history of religions and psychology, bringing a social science perspective to his work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Steve Farmer, John Henderson, and Michael Witzel, “Neurobiology, Layer Texts, and Correlative Cosmologies: A Cross-cultural Framework for Premodern History,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72, (2000): 48-90.