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INVITATION TO THE LECTURE

IS CONFUCIUS A CHINESE PHILOSOPHER?

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It is a well-known fact that the name of Confucius was brought to the attention of the European elites by the Jesuit missionaries present in China starting from the 16th century who depicted him as “the philosopher of the Chinese”, which gave rise to the myth of “philosophical China”. By the mid-18th century, however, this myth was to be overturned by another enduring one, that of China as a symbol of “oriental despotism”. Throughout the 19th century, China was subsequently relegated outside the boundaries of “philosophy” which had in the meantime turned into a professional discipline and become the marker of European identity. As a consequence, Confucius lapsed from the status of philosopher to that of a religious figurehead, and was shifted around as a mere pawn on the chessboard of European intellectual geography. The present lecture will attempt to understand how such an about-turn could possibly take place within just a few decades, and why we are stuck even today with the question of whether Confucianism is a philosophy or a religion.

Anne Cheng holds the Chair of Chinese Intellectual History at the Collège de France in Paris. Born to Chinese parents, she was educated in France, studying classics and European philosophy, until she entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure where she focused on Chinese studies. For nearly forty years she has been involved in teaching and research on the intellectual history of China, Confucianism in particular, initially at the CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research), then at INALCO (National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations), before her election to the Collège de France in 2008.

She has translated the *Analects of Confucius* into French, and has written a study of Han Confucianism, as well as a history of Chinese thought (*Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil, latest paperback edition 2014) which has been translated into numerous European and Asian languages. She has also edited several joint publications, notably *La pensée en Chine aujourd'hui* (Gallimard, 2007), and *Uses and Abuses of the Great Learning* (Collège de France, 2015). Since 2010, she has been chief editor of a bilingual series of works written in classical Chinese and published in French annotated translation at Belles Lettres.

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