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.

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