

## International Conference on “Pre-Qin Thinkers: Philosophical Thoughts and Debates”

Andrew Lambert

Andrew.lambert@cuny.csi.edu

### **Abstract: Seeing through the Aesthetic Worldview**

The Chinese tradition is sometimes described as an ‘aesthetic’ tradition, partly to distinguish it from a “Western” tradition. For example, early China, or at least some of its philosophical schools, is described in terms of an ‘aesthetic worldview’, and Confucian thought understood as a search for aesthetic order. But what does the term ‘aesthetic’ mean in this context? Is it simply a contrast with ‘rational’, such that a ‘rational order’ opposes aesthetic order? This paper will investigate contemporary attempts to articulate the notion of the ‘aesthetic’, by examining Ames and Hall’s notion of *ars contextualis* and Li Zehou’s account of 樂感文化 (*legan wenhua*).

I argue that emphasizing an aesthetic worldview can be essentializing and reductive. It can obliterate, for example, the differences between Confucians and Mohists – a dialectic important to the development of Confucianism. However, by more fully articulating the different senses of the term ‘aesthetic’, I show how it can help to draw attention to a cluster of unfamiliar or neglected ideas and approaches in early Confucian thought. I focus on one particular dimension of ‘aesthetic’ found in early Confucian texts - its expression as 樂 (broadly construed as delightful or joyful affective experiences). I consider how a concern with the aesthetic that derives from a focus on 樂 might function to ground a conception of ethical conduct.