

## ‘China as Philosophical Tool’

*François Jullien in conversation with Thierry Zarcone*

Since Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* the phrase ‘Copernican revolution’ has been used in many fields to illustrate an event equivalent to the one Kant brought to philosophy, a revolutionary change in perspective. And Thierry Marchaisse, who questions the philosopher and Sinologist François Jullien in the book *Penser d’un dehors (la Chine), entretiens d’Extrême-Orient*,<sup>1</sup> writes that the book proposes ‘nothing less than a relaunch of the great work of decentering that defines our modernity – in effect a new “Copernican reversal”’.<sup>2</sup> Jullien explains that ‘the confrontation between China and the West is one of the great contemporary issues’, that ‘Chinese thought reveals to us different coherences’, that it ‘also makes us go back to the preconceived ideas behind our Reason’, that it is thus ‘in the best position to intrigue today’s thinking and shake philosophy up’ . . . China as philosophical tool.

### Orient or non-Europe

‘Comparing European and Chinese thought with each other means diversifying and cross-fertilizing sources of illumination’; nothing is more to the point than this sentence, articulated by François Jullien in the course of our conversation, for those who thought up the theme for this issue of *Diogenes*: ‘From East to West – civilizations in a looking-glass’. This approach is not that of traditional Sinologists whom the specialism would keep absorbed in studying the other and cause to forget themselves, it is the attitude of a philosopher who uses Chinese thought, the Chinese view, to interrogate the thought and philosophy of Europe, understood as the West. His recent ‘essays’ on art, morality and philosophy reveal the progressive movement of his thinking, his questioning, his incessant to-and-fro between Greece and China, a detour that also claims to be a return.<sup>3</sup> He explains that they are so many knotted threads that resemble a net stretching from Europe to China. Why make a detour via China and not the Arab-Muslim world or India? Would it not be possible to feel far enough away from Europe in the Arab-Muslim world or India to be able to look at

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it from the outside? François Jullien replies that it would not, because we are still in a relationship of influence with the western world. What makes China special in relation to Europe is its utterly exterior quality, in language and history, but in a context of thought as fully developed as in Europe.

In fact the detour is worthwhile only if you find a truly alternative philosophy, a genuine 'counterpart to Greece', a 'non-Europe',<sup>4</sup> an other that is sufficiently other to allow you to look at yourself from the outside, to stand apart . . . So, where many people think they see an East, François Jullien very pertinently shows us it is just another West; for instance, the Arab-Muslim world, where we find Greek thought and the Scriptures revised and enriched by Mohammed; India, which remains Indo-European despite its unsettling side. The true 'counterpart to Greece' is only to be found, Jullien thinks, in China: he tells me that then you emerge from the 'great European wellspring, the Hebrews and Aristotles. It is this situation that creates the tool . . . '.

Jullien's quest is an attempt to escape from a 'mental cage', to try to push to the limit the experience of thinking in a foreign setting; which in particular means trying to think beyond the categories of thought (substance, quantity, quality) that Aristotle believed he had isolated in the absolute, whereas they were in fact peculiar to his language, Greek. Thus, if we follow Jullien's argument, the western philosopher only thinks like a Greek and not like a simple human being. In the method adopted by Jullien is there an attempt to extend our reading of the world by combining Greek thinking and Chinese thinking? A kind of confrontation?

In this method Chinese thought plays the part of a 'reactive agent revealing other modes of *intelligibility*', but not of *truth* since this word, as François Jullien reminds us, is too closely bound up with our philosophical history. This caution is explained in the pages I think are the finest in *Penser d'un dehors, la Chine*, where the author demonstrates that China's great originality is not thinking Being, God or freedom, whereas these concepts are at the heart of the concerns of western philosophy, its theologies and even its mystique. So this difference means that China can think 'what has partially eluded our thinking: the indistinct, the transitional, the unassignable, etc.'<sup>5</sup> If western philosophy opted for thinking the distinct (Descartes), China teaches us to think the indistinct indistinctly (Tao thought).

François Jullien reminds us that European thought, inherited from the Greeks, is dominated by the sensory preconception that resulted in the philosophy of the object; the spirit "'sees", the heart sees (St Augustine)': e-vidence goes back to seeing (Latin *videre*). In the West, philosophy, science and art were constructed in the classical period in accordance with this subject-object relationship. In China, however, that approach, which in fact was not unknown, was not the influential trend in thought. Instead China's assumption is about breathing; Jullien maintains that its philosophy is a 'philosophy of breathing'; empty and full, coming in and going out. Everything is energy, 'related to energy'. I tell him how wary I am of the word energy, bandied about by 'New Age' groups; he is aware of this and explains that he himself always associates the word energy with breath, the *qi*. He adds that this energy accompanies the Chinese view everywhere; in their relationship with the body through the slow movements of Tai Chi; in medicine and painting – areas where our habits of thought are still unsettled. Jullien stresses that the human body

is not conceived of from its anatomical structure but thought of 'in movement in accordance with a complex interplay of energy circuits', our acupuncture meridians.<sup>6</sup> Similarly Chinese painting, which he considers to be 'energy painting', aims to paint people 'in intimate relation to the world around: because the whole landscape, like the human body, is crossed by breaths that cause it to vibrate'.<sup>7</sup> This painting, as he explains, is a movement of taking and releasing – *qu-yu* – 'taking' shape and 'releasing' it to the undifferentiated, to and fro, *yin* and *yang*. His latest book is entirely devoted to this theme; its title *La Grande Image n'a pas de forme* takes up a phrase from *Laozi*.

François Jullien points out that European philosophy had no 'other choice but to swing between the Bible and Parmenides' and that only by going to China can we gain sufficient distance to reconsider those two sources from the outside. And he explains that to achieve this we have to 'decategorize': 'de- and re-configuring, this is the philosophical meaning I give to my work because of going to China'. Two pitfalls are to be avoided then: the first is 'easy humanism', our humanism, built on the belief in universal categories; the second is 'lazy relativism' that thinks each culture has its own peculiarities, which runs the risk of enclosing it within its identity. What should be sought with great care, he tells me, are the 'possible universalizers'.

Then coming home means that you can 'get to grips with what you know', this 'well-known that eludes us'. François Jullien demonstrates this in his essay on the Nude: 'Chinese distance makes us reflect on the Nude in the West, whereas it is so commonplace in western art that it becomes difficult to think about it because you are no longer aware of your theoretical assumptions.' The Nude, which runs through the whole of aesthetics and western art, is non-existent in China;<sup>8</sup> indeed Greek theoretical options are located in the Nude, whereas Chinese logic is articulated around its absence. Finally Jullien notes that in the West we have always wondered about the how of the Nude but never about the why. Putting these two views of the Nude into perspective allows us to explore, through the absence of the Nude in Chinese art, what makes it impossible there, and this itself illuminates the conditions of its possibility in the West.

### **Japan as China and non-China**

François Jullien has taken an interest in the European thinkers who have been intrigued, fascinated, unsettled by their contact with the East, thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in Japan. The example of the first, 'intrigued and unsettled' after his conversation with a Buddhist monk in a Zen temple in 1978, is symptomatic of the attitude of western philosophy to eastern thought. For Foucault admits that he did not take away anything from his experience of Japan, even though he evinced an interest in Buddhist philosophy and Zen exercises. Jullien points out that Foucault did not know how to express the disorientation that Japan offered him and he focuses in particular – and this brings us back to the question of categories of thought and the need to 'de- and re-categorize' – on the fact that Foucault cannot do without the category 'mysticism' to define what Zen is: 'I think

Zen is utterly different from Christian mysticism. And I think that Zen is a mysticism' (Foucault).<sup>9</sup>

I shall continue with the example of Zen. Omori Sogen, master of the meditation room, explains to Foucault that Zen has to be understood with one's experience and not only with one's mind in order to discover its universality. But dialogue becomes impossible because, clinging as he does to western thought, Foucault cannot understand Zen in that way. According to Jullien dialogue between Omori and Foucault is doomed to failure because 'each of them takes from his own intellectual history a different emphasis for the idea of "consciously grasping" and concludes that "consciously grasping" is in fact not "grasping", and that the secret of Zen consciousness is that it is not about grasping; it is about starting up . . . and remaining occupied *by this* day by day through rigorous exercises'. This Japanese version of Chinese wisdom is not without interest for François Jullien who is considering the idea of devoting a book to it in the future.

I asked Jullien what he thinks of the Japanese philosophers from the Kyôto School (Nishitani, Nishida, Takeuchi, Ueda), who are said to seek a middle way between the concept and Zen. The main line of thinking of the School's founder, Nishida Kitarô, follows a 'logic of contradictory self-identity . . . a philosophical expression of the paradoxical thought that is found running throughout the whole tradition of *mâdhyâmika* Buddhism, from Nâgârjuna's phenomenism to the enigmatic formulations of the Zen kôans'.<sup>10</sup> It might be thought that conceptualizing this 'paradoxical thought' by means of categories from western philosophy – which the Kyôto School philosophers are supposed to do – is a strategy that in some ways could recall Jullien's strategy . . . But going West? So could they be travelling in the opposite direction to him? Could they also be unsettling themselves and trying contact with the West?

François Jullien corrects this attractive idea at once by referring to the difference in historical situation: since encountering the West, Japan has had no other way out but to operate with western categories; which means that its conceptual tools are now borrowed from the West. Even if Nishida Kitarô, the leading figure in this school, expresses Japanese tradition anew by using Europe, Jullien explains, his project is nevertheless first of all to get Japanese thought recognized. As for the Zen tradition that has inspired some Japanese philosophers, that is completely different and is situated outside European philosophy. François Jullien tells me that Zen is an 'immediate grasping of the immediate', whereas European thought is a 'mediated grasping of the immediate' (by the concept); whether we think of calligraphy or haiku poetry: 'Zen is like a bonzaï. Maybe it is a tiny garden, a miniature garden, but it contains everything, or rather *it is not a part of anything*. It is in itself the whole world.'<sup>11</sup>

And so François Jullien's Japan is a Janus-Japan with two faces: on one side a philosophy that in its own way continues western philosophy; on the other a tradition of non-discursiveness and anti-philosophy symbolized by Zen, whose traces we already find in China: 'Japan is therefore this paradox of a basic culture that is partly incompatible with Chinese culture and yet Chineseified at certain levels . . .'.<sup>12</sup>

## From Confucius to Montaigne

François Jullien has encountered opposition, criticism – the reverse would have been surprising – and the strongest is perhaps from philosophers who consider, with considerable arrogance, that Chinese thought is simply wisdom built on collections of moral precepts, the childhood of philosophy, a pre-philosophy. He points out that in the West it is hard to 'dis-order' philosophy, to 'drag it out of its ordered ways'.<sup>13</sup> But above all, as he maintains in his book *Un sage est sans idée ou l'autre de la philosophie*, 'philosophy has a problem with wisdom', and he demonstrates the gulf that separates them. First, there is no surprise or questioning at the root of wisdom, unlike philosophy;<sup>14</sup> 'philosophy has a history but wisdom does not'. Then, the sage, of whom Confucius is the best illustration, is without ideas, that is to say that he possesses none and is the prisoner of none; this is the Confucians' 'middle way' and the Taoists 'void': the sage takes no sides, and thus avoids partisanship and can 'evolve' in the midst of availability. Jullien summarizes clearly the two movements of thought: on one hand the operation of philosophy 'via abstracting–constructing'; on the other the operation of wisdom via 'stringing together and continuing': 'philosophy "conceives" – wisdom *traverses*'.<sup>15</sup> I find this last phrase resounds like a *koan*<sup>16</sup> . . . stringing together and continuing? François Jullien explains the first word with a phrase from Confucius: "'one" is enough to traverse my *tao*', which means: 'there is something of the one that goes through that', or 'there is a thread that runs through everything, links together everything from inside'. It is the idea of an internal unity that is manifest everywhere . . . . The philosophy of breathing, the philosophy of the energy-breath . . . .

But are there 'bridges' between China and Europe? According to Jullien, Montaigne might form a bridge with the Chinese sage. So should we re-read the *Essays* with a new eye? Yes, he replies, and especially his last essay 'On Experience' because in that text Montaigne, distancing himself from philosophy as speculation, and making us 'return to China, he argues against philosophy and links up with thinking about immanence'. This is a text 'that acts as a bridge with China'. How? The Chinese sage, like Montaigne's thinker, plugs in to immanence ('Nature is a gentle guide') and the great lesson he passes on to us is to 'live appropriately': live in accordance with the moment, live according to the season. Live appropriately, live according to the season . . . François Jullien digresses on the subject of time, which is not rendered by any concept in China. For the Chinese think rather of the moment, the seasonal moment and the duration of processes.<sup>17</sup> 'If you act seasonably,' Jullien points out, 'it means that you then almost do not need to act, just as the peasant weeds, hoes, sows, waters and harvests at the right moment; he has managed to capture immanence. Similarly, if the ruler intervenes at the right moment, he has almost no need to intervene.'

This acting seasonably is non-action; it is the non-action of the sage. 'Montaigne's living appropriately', which is not living in the present as the philosophy of time tried to think of it in France, is a corollary to eastern 'non-action'. This non-action is not non-acting by holding back and passivity but carrying out another form of effectiveness drawn from processes themselves: what Jullien calls '*efficience*'. Montaigne has no followers, Jullien notes, because he comes before the philosophy–literature

split, just as there is no philosophy of seasons in Europe, no philosophy that treated seasons seriously . . . except in poetry.

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Travelling to China, stopping off in China, passing through China . . . And definitely not staying there, says François Jullien. Even if the return journey never ends: you never stop learning Chinese. But the return should continually be an inspiration for work, for what is stopping and what danger lies in doing so? Why not adopt Confucianism or Taoism instead of 'passing through' the wisdoms they embody? François Jullien explains that for a thinker staying in China, specializing in it, 'going native', means a dead stop to questions, it means ceasing to look at the place you come from instead of reconsidering it against the new experience acquired of extreme alterity, in the light of other 'possible modes of coherence', of intelligibilities. Jullien demonstrates the whole point of returning in his essays on the Nude, on insipidity, morality or speech when, for instance, in his most recent work, he re-reads Socrates against the conversations of Confucius.<sup>18</sup> Thus his philosophical exercise depends on a return journey from Greece to China and not a one-way trip . . . . He writes that we must 'make sure that thought from outside gives (European) philosophy the opportunity to be reflected'.<sup>19</sup> But beware of fascination with China, beware of the East that would save us from the narrowness of European categories, beware of the East of mysticisms, beware of the East that is the obverse of the West, beware of the irrational East, beware of the gurus' East . . . François Jullien vehemently attacks using China as 'the West's safety valve' or as 'an instant solution for Europe's theoretical aporia'.

In conclusion Jullien emphasizes that, far from ever abandoning questions, his stopover in China in fact allowed him to frame better questions and even revolutionize his questioning. So he remains a philosopher who is attached to the need to 'think in a different way', which has forever been philosophy's mission, a mission reformulated by Foucault and Deleuze. But in order to think in a different way his method, or rather his 'strategy' – this is his word – is not to say 'no' to previous philosophers or 'kill the fathers', but to 'bring the other into play via the heterotopia of China', to unsettle the philosophical family with the trip to China, 'through displacement' . . . . There is no doubt that thought, philosophy, art are going through a great process of renewal and that visiting Jullien's 'building site' – this is what he calls his essays – confirms the fact that a stopover in China allows us to rethink our assumptions and ask ourselves questions about our own prejudices: what we base our thinking on and for that very reason are unable to think about. Thus the challenge is to reconfigure the areas of the thinkable. '*The Phenomenology of Mind* ought to be re-written,' he insists, 'because it is only the history of a mind, European culture's, not *the* Mind . . . .'

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

## Notes

1. Paris, Seuil, 2000.
2. p. 5. Some of the ideas developed in this book, which F. Jullien wrote with T. Marchaisse, are summarized in F. Jullien, 'De la Grèce à la Chine, aller-retour', *Le Débat*, Paris, Gallimard, 116, September–October 2001, pp. 134–43.
3. *Éloge de la fadeur* (Paris and Arles, Philippe Picquier, 1991; republished by Le Livre de Poche, 1993); *Fonder la morale* (Paris, Grasset, 1995; republished by Le Livre de Poche, 1998); *Le Détour et l'accès. Stratégies du sens en Chine, en Grèce* (Paris, Grasset, 1995; republished by Le Livre de Poche, 1997); *Traité de l'efficacité* (Paris, Grasset, 1996); *Un sage est sans idée, ou l'autre de la philosophie* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1998); *De l'essence ou du Nu* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000); *Du 'Temps'. Éléments d'une philosophie du vivre* (Paris, Grasset, 2001).
4. *Penser d'un dehors*, pp. 39–40.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 264–76.
6. *De l'essence ou du Nu*, p. 74.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
8. The erotic exists but belongs to a different register; see *De l'essence ou du Nu*, pp. 62–6.
9. *Penser d'un dehors*, pp. 17–22.
10. Bernard Stevens, 'En guise d'introduction: une présentation de l'École de Kyoto', *Études phénoménologiques*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 18, 1993, p. 30.
11. *Penser d'un dehors*, p. 25.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
14. *Un sage est sans idée*, p. 19.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
16. A poem with a paradoxical meaning that fixes the words uttered spontaneously by a Zen master in order to guide his disciple at a particular moment in his progress.
17. This is also true of Japan; see Augustin Berque, *Le Sauvage et l'artifice. Les Japonais devant la nature*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, pp. 21–59.
18. 'Le détour de la parole, ou Confucius face à Socrate', *Philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 44, 1994, pp. 72–95.
19. 'De la Grèce à la Chine, aller-retour', pp. 135–6, 142.