

## REVIEWS

Jean-François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*  
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HENRY ZHAO

### CONTESTING CONFUCIUS

Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy has long remained within its own small specialized ambit: a few scholars teaching a few students, so that the latter in turn may teach a few more students later on. They have constituted a rare species, which respectable universities have chosen to preserve. The subject appeared to have little wider relevance within these institutions, let alone outside. So it comes as quite a surprise to find a debate over traditional philosophy that has been raging in China for nearly a century suddenly blazing out within Western sinological circles, hitherto characterized by library quietness. It is even more astonishing to find the most famous sinologist in France so resoundingly condemned by a more senior fellow-sinologist, and in an eponymously titled pamphlet. If I were François Jullien, I should consider it an honour.

The passionate intensities that arguments over Confucian philosophy have generated in China had seemed unimaginable among those foreign scholars accustomed to watching the conflict with a marveling gaze, but always from a safe distance. Until now. Jean-François Billeter's pamphlet, *Contre François Jullien*, burns with the fire of indignation on almost every page. Billeter himself, born in 1939, is a French-Swiss scholar best known for his sociological study of the sixteenth-century rebel thinker, Li Zhi, in the context of the late Ming mandarin state, and for his works on the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*. Billeter was responsible for establishing the Sinology Department at the University of Geneva, where he taught until his retirement in 1999.

Judging from this blistering text, however, he has not retired from intellectual life. Billeter's target, François Jullien, has had a more spectacular career. Currently professor of Chinese Philosophy at Paris University VII, Jullien is also a familiar figure in French public intellectual life: interviewed on his work by *Le Monde* and *Le Débat*; much in demand by businessmen and investors seeking 'an understanding' of China's multi-millennial culture—without which, they have been assured, it will be harder to turn a profit in the People's Republic of Confucius, Sunzi and Laozi.

Born in 1951, Jullien switched from studying Greek philosophy at L'École Normale Supérieure to Chinese studies in the early 1970s in the hope—as he has explained in numerous books and interviews over the past fifteen years—that Chinese philosophy would throw into question all the 'great universals' of European thinking. It had to be China because, for Jullien, this is the only historic culture to constitute Europe's 'great other': the Arabic and Hebraic worlds are 'closely connected to our own history. We are also linked with India linguistically, with only a few divisions between Greek and Sanskrit. In order to get away from Europe completely, China is the only choice: Japanese culture is only a variation.' There duly followed a spell in Shanghai and Beijing (1975–77) and a doctoral thesis on Lu Xun, the pioneering iconoclast of modern Chinese literature. From 1978–81 Jullien had an official posting in Hong Kong, and was based in Japan from 1985 until 1987. Since his return to Paris in 1989 Jullien has been remarkably productive: a book a year on average, amounting to 23 to date, the latest an almost immediate response to Billeter. The French press has met each new release with blanket coverage and generous approval. His books have been widely translated; four have appeared in Chinese and, interestingly, six in Vietnamese.

Jullien's first major work was *Process or Creation* (1989), a study of the seventeenth-century Confucian philosopher, Wang Fuzhi, whose writing Jullien dubs 'the thought of Chinese literature'. The book maps out the themes and the 'comparatist' method that he would deploy in all his later works; in this sense, his scholarship may be regarded as very consistent. Chinese thought is not only fundamentally different to that of Europe, Jullien argues, but often far superior to it. Thus by starting with the notion of 'process', rather than that of 'creation', Chinese philosophy dispenses with the cumbersome enigma of being and, therefore, with metaphysics. The book made his reputation as an ambitious and promising young scholar and, having dealt with God, Jullien moved on to art. *In Praise of Blandness* (1991) argues that the plainness treasured in Chinese aesthetics, even though it seems to betoken an 'absence of flavour', is in fact superior to any flavour as it is open to all potential variations, and even to a possible 'internal deliverance'. In aesthetics as in philosophy, China achieves an elegant victory over Europe.

In 1992 Jullien tackled another grandiose philosophical topic in *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China*. The character *Shi* is notoriously ambiguous—dictionary definitions include ‘power, influence, authority, strength; aspect, circumstances, conditions’—but Jullien’s interpretation is not made any easier by his translating it as ‘propensity’, a term he borrows, tellingly, from Leibniz. The following year, his *Figures of Immanence* offered ‘a philosophical reading of the I-Ching’, ‘the strangest of all strange books’. Once again, Chinese immanence is pitted against Western transcendence, and wins the match. The *Book of Changes*, Jullien claims, is in sharp contrast to European thinking because it creates an understanding of the world without recourse to mystery or abstraction, whereas European thought is focused on being, or on God. Once again, however, the superiority of early Chinese philosophy is elucidated by Jullien’s very free interpretation of it, via Hellenized or Europeanized terms. This is paradoxical, since his avowed intellectual strategy is ‘to take China as a detour to access Greece’. Indeed his next big (400-page) book, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (1995), is an explicit attempt at this. It examines the earliest Confucianist and Daoist classics—the *Analects*, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi—and discovers that they share a common characteristic: an indefinite form of discourse, which refuses to tackle essentialist universalities but instead integrates all possible perspectives, so as to develop diversity. This ‘detour’ takes us to the point furthest removed from the Greek *logos*, which we can now ‘access’—and find to be particularly ‘abstract and stagnant’ by comparison. Both the argument and the conclusion are typical of Jullien’s work.

In a particularly productive year, Jullien published a second book in 1995, a *Dialogue on Morals*, featuring an imaginary debate between Mencius and an Enlightenment philosopher; the latter is a confection of Jullien’s, an unlikely combination of Pascal, Rousseau, Schopenhauer and Kant, and it will come as no surprise to learn that he is worsted by the sage. Turning from ethics to political and military philosophy, Jullien’s *Treatise on Efficacy* (1997) finds that, in war or diplomacy, Westerners (Aristotle, Machiavelli, Clausewitz) are clumsier operators than the Chinese (Sunzi, Hanfeizi, Guiguzi), who see effectiveness as primarily achieved by non-action whereas the former apparently rely on ‘consumption to overcome resistance’. His 1998 work, *A Sage Has No Ideas*, is the most widely translated of Jullien’s books. Chinese thinkers use wisdom, he argues, but not ‘ideas’, whereas Western philosophers work through abstraction and construction. The Chinese accept reality as nature provides it; any abstract idea is thus a prejudice against nature. The sage therefore avoids these, while the Europeans merely distance themselves from true philosophy.

Jullien returned to aesthetics in 2000 with *The Impossible Nude*, which renders the ‘absence of flavour’ that he explored in *Blandness* more tangible.

Nudity has always existed in Western culture, yet it is almost completely absent in Chinese art. These degrees of body covering warrant a further philosophical comparison, which leads Jullien to conclude that nakedness is an exposure of the present; the Chinese approach, by emphasizing the absent, opens up a 'sensual access to ontology'. In 2003, *The Great Image Has No Form* showed Western art to be obsessed with overcoming the 'objectivity' of the object, and thus constantly chasing the ghost of reality. Chinese art, by contrast, does not limit itself to the appearance of the object; the 'great image' refuses resemblance and thus avoids becoming a partial image, imprisoned in a static form.

The above-mentioned are just a selection of Jullien's books to date. To the charge of eclecticism, he breezily admits (in *Le Débat*, for example) that his work may appear 'discontinuous': strategy, blandness, morality, etc. But these are 'angles from which to return to the central question about the prejudices of European reason generally. Not being able to take on the latter forthright, I was left with only one possibility: to run from one point to another in order to weave a kind of problematic *network*.' In each book he manages to come up with a couple of catchy phrases, neat in French at least, to make Chinese philosophy seem appealingly different yet understandable; and not only superior to that of the West but highly illuminating to Westerners. Doubt naturally arises in one's mind: why is it, if Chinese thought is so much better than that of Ancient Greece or any other civilization, that some Chinese themselves fail to see that theirs is the greatest culture in the world? Just to say that it is because China is not 'the other' to China is not enough.

This is where Billeter comes in. His counter-blast identifies Jullien as the latest in a series of European writers who have founded their work on the myth of China's absolute otherness. Billeter cites Victor Segalen, Marcel Granet, Richard Wilhelm and Pierre Ryckmans, for whom China also constitutes 'the fundamental other'. But the origins of the myth can be traced back to Voltaire and the 'sinophile Enlightenment' of the eighteenth century. Voltaire and the *philosophes*, of course, used China as a foil, to represent the opposite of the regime they were fighting against at home. Jullien, Billeter claims, has taken this myth and updated it to the present, while at the same time hiding its political significance. This is the core of his argument. For Voltaire and his contemporaries founded their vision of China on the picture provided by their enemies, the Jesuits, who themselves had a keen material interest in painting a favourable picture of Imperial institutions and the Confucianism that structured them, since they hoped to convert the Empire from above, through the person of the Emperor. It was Confucianism, they explained, that constituted the astonishing 'key to the vault of the intellectual universe of the mandarins'. The Jesuits, for Billeter, are the originators of this myth of the marvellous Chinese 'other', of which

Jullien is the latest propagator. The crux of the matter, Billeter argues, lies in understanding the political uses of Chinese philosophy, both historically—as Imperial ideology—and in the present day.

Billeter gives a succinct account of the first process. During what has become known in retrospect as the ‘first stage’ of Confucianism, from the sixth to the third centuries BC, China was more of a geographical concept than a country, with numerous principalities and kingdoms confronting each other, in a situation akin to that of Ancient Greece; and as in Greece, different schools of philosophers competed for the ears of kings and princes, with Confucius (551–479BC) and the generations of disciples who succeeded him forming only one of the many schools. The first attempt to consolidate a Chinese empire under the Qin dynasty (221–206BC) was short-lived and ruthless; its rulers burnt all classic texts with the exception of Legalist works. From 206BC the second attempt, under the Han, adopted a different approach. Han ministers-cum-court-philosophers reconstructed ‘pre-Imperial’ Confucianism, as Billeter calls it, into a set of cosmological and moral doctrines. The mandarin state was badly in need of a philosophy that could serve as ideological support to the new-born Empire. Mingling it with, and so disguising, the brutally coercive ‘Legalism’ of the previous era, the Han mandarins thus launched the ‘second stage’ of Confucianism.

These early ideologues were so successful that the imperial institutions their philosophy helped to sustain persisted in China for over two thousand years, before finally collapsing in the early twentieth century. ‘What we today regard as “Chinese civilization”’, Billeter concludes, ‘is closely linked to imperial despotism’—in contrast to Greek philosophy which, apparently unconnected to any form of despotism, has served as the source of the ‘political freedom and democracy that runs through European history’. In China, however, even seemingly pure philosophical concepts such as *Zhongyong*—usually translated as ‘golden mean’, but which Jullien calls ‘regulation’—were originally proposed to imperial officialdom as a technique of rule, Billeter argues.

The succeeding stages of Confucianism have been equally political. During the Southern Song and the Ming dynasties, from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, a number of scholars influenced by Buddhism and Daoism contributed to the more sophisticated development of Confucian philosophy. This revival is often referred to as the ‘third stage’, or—in the West—as Neo-Confucianism. From 1644 however the emperors of the Manchu dynasty, anxious to legitimate their ethnic-minority rule, resorted to a more conservative brand of Confucian ethics, turning it into a kind of fundamentalist dogmatism. After China’s traumatic nineteenth-century encounter with Western military and cultural invasion, Confucianism was widely regarded as the major obstacle to China’s modernization. Yet in the second half of the

twentieth century it has experienced several attempts at resurrection. These efforts, known as New Confucianism—*Xin Ruxue*—are often referred to as the ‘fourth stage’. Billeter is on strong ground, then, when he attacks Jullien’s airbrushed, depoliticizing account.

Billeter also has little difficulty demolishing Jullien’s philosophical claims, pointing out the ‘missed encounter’ in each of his works. Though Jullien purports to engage with a different philosophical tradition, he never lets any of its representatives speak: there are few direct quotations or close readings of primary texts and he provides no full contextual accounts of the thinkers he mentions. Instead, his technique is to cherry-pick discrete notions as a thematic focus, presenting a homogenized account of the whole philosophical landscape in China. Jullien also entrenches the myth of China’s otherness through his method of translation. Concepts such as *Dao* or *Shi* cannot simply be plucked from their contexts, and rendered by some New Age approximation. To translate *Dao* as ‘process’, as Jullien does, is a misnomer that succeeds only in impressing the layman. Jullien the sinophile is accused of betraying what is truly Chinese. Rather than focus on particular words one must translate the whole context, Billeter argues, and this is only possible if one starts from the assumption of shared human experience and an understanding of basic ‘commonalities’. The Chinese might not, Billeter argues, have such a high opinion of their ancients because, paradoxically, they are ‘free and responsible people’ who might not have enjoyed despotism that much. To counter Jullien’s Hellenization of Chinese concepts Billeter tries to describe the Chinese as ‘people among us’, thus making their philosophy politically comprehensible.

Following his account of the remodelling of early Chinese philosophy as imperial ideology, Billeter discusses the intellectual ferment that attended its downfall. In some respects these are the most interesting passages in his book, for the attitudes of the Chinese who live in the real rather than the sinological world can shed some light on these complicated issues. According to Billeter, in the early decades of the twentieth century the modern Chinese intelligentsia of the May Fourth generation split into four factions over their attitude to traditional Chinese thought. Radical iconoclasts (like Chen Duxiu, founder of the Communist Party) reject it completely; critical intellectuals (like Gu Jigang, the liberal-sceptic historian) question its ‘sacred’ source; comparatists (like Feng Youlan, author of the first history of Chinese philosophy) try to compare it to Western philosophy; purists (like Qian Mu, a Confucianist educator) insist that it is simply incomparable, as well as incommunicable to the West.

The four factions can actually be divided into two camps: the critics and the apologists. Among the latter, both the comparatists and the purists, though differing in approach, arrive at the same conclusion: Chinese superiority.

Jullien, according to Billeter, is a typical comparatist and, like his Chinese counterparts, unfailingly concludes that Chinese philosophy far surpasses all other varieties. Both critics and apologists have successors among younger generations of scholars in modern China, and the confrontation, instead of petering out over the years, has become even more heated, especially after China's economic take-off. Billeter cites the examples of two younger scholars. Mou Zhongjian is today's purist; writing in archaic Chinese in his 2005 essay, 'The Grand Chinese Way', he declares that Western civilization has passed its peak, culturally as well as economically, and the twenty-first century will be China's. Li Dongjun, at Nankai University, represents the new iconoclasts. In her 2004 book, *The Canonization of Confucius and the Confucianist Revolution*, she argues that Confucianism as a system of representation still has a tenacious grip on the Chinese mentality and, despite the demise of the Empire a century ago, still leads its subjects to fulfil a 'duty of abnegation in favour of totality'.

Billeter calls for the demythification of China as a 'fundamental other'. The necessity to understand its philosophy as an imperial ideology is a political one: 'not in order to reduce the role it has played in history, but to determine the approach we want to take to it'. This becomes all the more urgent because, although 'in the past the Europeans and the Chinese lived apart, this ancient separation is no more. Today we are facing the same historical moment, and should act together and understand each other.' The myth of the other now deters mutual understanding between China and the West. This is the ultimate insult to Jullien, whose purported aim has always been to bring about this understanding. Billeter puts it bluntly: 'Those who endorse a critical reflection on the past in fact subscribe to political liberty and democracy, while the comparatists accommodate more readily to the state of power'.

The last chapter of *Contre François Jullien*, 'One Must Choose', calls for readers to take a stand. As Billeter's reviewer, I guess I am not allowed to refuse. But are these the only choices on offer? I would say that both Jullien's de-politicization of traditional Chinese philosophy and Billeter's insistent politicization, according to the 'universal' standard of modern liberalism—hardly a Greek thought, but rather a very recent European product—are highly problematic. The issue is not whether China is specific or universal; China is both, to a certain degree. But it is simply not to the benefit of the Chinese to be told again and again that their culture was (and is) so unique that it can actually cure the deadly Western disease. Such an attitude was popular in Voltaire's Europe and it might play well in Jullien's. But the fantastical otherness that Jullien so seductively depicts has worked to the detriment of the Chinese over the last few centuries, and there is no reason to believe that otherness is a preferable projection today. Chinese philosophy has to break out of its cold cocoon

of alterity to the West, regardless of how tightly Jullien and other comparatists have been wrapping it up with their claims for its supremacy.

To be fair, Jullien knows perfectly well where philosophy intersects with politics. If the discussion of Chinese modes of ‘effectiveness’ in his books has always been somewhat mystifying, to a Chinese reader at least, in his press interviews he has been more clear-cut. In a 2005 *Le Monde* interview, he explains that, in the spring of 1989, only the students and a minority in the Communist Party were in favour of democracy. The vast majority wanted the maintenance of order, which the CCP was best equipped to provide, so that they could carry on working hard and getting richer. The Chinese government had known how to regulate the explosive situation that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution and de-Maoization. In masterful fashion, Deng Xiaoping had deftly avoided being dragged into debates on his economic reforms, and instead pushed through a ‘silent revolution’ which has proved a resounding success. Jullien explains that the reason for Deng’s triumph is because his strategic thinking was based on the Chinese notion of effectiveness. Even Jullien acknowledges, then, though not explicitly, that in China today, philosophy is political.

Indeed, it is arguably more political than ever. During the 1980s and 1990s there was a powerful movement for the ‘revival of Confucianism’, mainly fanned by Chinese scholars teaching in the United States, who proposed that a Confucianist work ethic, comparable to that of Weberian Puritanism, lay behind the spectacular success of capitalism in Far Eastern countries. Du Weiming at Harvard is the leading star of this movement. ‘First of all’, he argues, ‘in Far Eastern countries there is a cooperation between a powerful economy and the State; and secondly, there is a coordination between democracy, elitism and moral education; and, lastly, there is a strong sense of team spirit, although an individual is also allowed to claim personal achievements’. Du frequently states that most of the companies in those countries are run on a family basis, and therefore more ‘efficiently’—Jullien would be proud—than their Western competitors.

The 1990s ‘revival’ was, somehow, muffled by the Asian financial crisis that suddenly exploded in 1997 and spread rapidly along the so-called ‘Dragon Path’ (or Confucianist sphere of influence) from Singapore to South Korea and Japan, exposing the fragility of the economies and, in some cases, the political structures of those countries. In recent years, however, another movement, the *guoxue re* or ‘native philosophy fever’, has been sweeping mainland China like a prairie fire. Popularizers of philosophy have been turned into stars by state-run television, reminiscent of the evangelists in the United States in the 1980s. School students are made to learn Confucius by rote, without any requirement to understand or interpret him. In 2006 there were a series of efforts aimed at reviving popular interest in Confucianism.



In May, several internet giants sponsored the selection of ‘national philosophy masters’; in July, publicity around a traditional ‘Confucianist Primary School’ in Shanghai caused great controversy; in September, a ‘standard’ Confucius statue and portrait were released internationally, and a large number of scholars signed a proposal to establish Confucius’s birthday as an official ‘Teachers’ Day’. Many encourage students to burn incense and kowtow to the statue of Confucius before taking exams, rather than to Buddha, because the latter is not scholarly. A sound and wise suggestion. But these attempts to do more and more for Confucius are unending, and we shall definitely see many more of them prevail. Jullien may not have realized that his idealization of early Chinese philosophy could help to provide this ‘fever’ with an innocently apolitical veil.

The government’s attitude towards the ‘native philosophy fever’ has been ambiguous. Though its founders were all iconoclasts, the Communist Party has ‘opened up’ since the early 1980s. China has discovered that globalization and international competition work in its favour. In fact, the CCP is now extremely sensitive to hints of economic protectionism and political isolationism on the rise in the United States, Europe and Russia. That is why it is not eager to see China ‘turning inwards’ itself. On the other hand, the government considers nationalist sentiment among the masses to be a unifying force which legitimizes its rule. Since the authorities are sitting on the fence, the ‘fever’ has been, until now, a more or less spontaneous movement among the masses and intellectuals, stoked by a newly found national pride among the populace, but only half-heartedly encouraged by the government. In Chengdu, the city where I have resettled, people gather in tea-houses on Sunday mornings to hear lectures on traditional philosophy, though I doubt they would want to hear ideological admonitions. But the ‘fever’ itself is, beyond doubt, ideological in its agenda, an attempt to fill the vacuum of values in modern-day China. Spurred by China’s increased economic strength, the ‘fever’ will develop rapidly. This is why the issues Billeter raises are of such importance. Philosophical speculation on otherness, once pushed to an extreme, risks becoming dangerously attractive. Diversity can be encouraged without rendering difference into something unrecognizable, unreachable. When otherness is made into myth, it may serve neither those inside it nor those outside. This fiery debate among French-speaking sinologists is, we may hope, only the prelude to a fuller discussion on the price of keeping the other as the other.