

# China as the Absolute Other and Mirror of the West in the François Jullien's Theory

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This article aims to define and name the contribution of the French sinologist and theorist François Jullien to the field of comparative studies, looking at the intersections of Chinese and Western civilisations. It reveals how this theorist, drawing on the legacy of Chinese thought and developing new concepts and individual methodology, challenges traditional comparative studies, opening up opportunities to look at the heritage of Western civilisation's thinking from the outside, discovering what was not thought of in it. Such a rigorous deconstruction of the traditional Western norms of thinking opens the way to new possibilities for research on different civilisations.

**Keywords:** concept, dialogue, Jullien, East, West

## INTRODUCTION

In his book *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966), the French theorist Michel Foucault reflected on how the relations between signifiers and signifieds are established in highly unstable and morally questionable (even unjustifiable) systems of 'épistème' or 'knowledge' that predetermine what and how we think. The 'knowledge system' or 'matrix of knowledge' of a given period is the basis of the entire Western worldview, but we cannot see it ourselves, just as the eye cannot turn around to see itself. The series of articles (the first of which is presented here) discusses the main trends in the humanities of the 21st century, trying to show how the perception of our own cognitive boundaries has changed and continues to change in attempts to understand other cultures and civilisations. This article focuses on the research methodology and conceptual tools of the prominent sinologist and theorist of our time, François Jullien, which are applied to the understanding of Chinese civilisation.

Jullien's works have been translated into other languages and have attracted a considerable attention in the academic field. They have been viewed controversially in certain discourses. Among the many academic works devoted to Jullien's thinking, the most notable are the critical analyses of his works by Jean-François Billeter (2006), Ralph Weber (2014) and You Wu (2024). Separate collections of articles have been compiled to analyse Jullien's ideas, among which the following should be mentioned first: *Oser construire: Pour François Jullien* (2007) and a special issue of the magazine *Theory, Culture & Society* compiled by Shiqiau Li and Scott Lahs under the name *Against Ontology: Chinese Thought and François Jullien* (2023). In these publications, among the three dozen scholars studying Jullien's work, we can find

the names of prominent theorists such as Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, Jean-François Lyotard, Yuk Hui, or Paul Ricoeur.

The first part of this article discusses Jullien's conceptual tools and methodological strategy. The second part of the article focuses on the analysis of Chinese thinking, grammatical specificity, understanding of time and space in Jullien's theory, viewed from the perspective of the Western tradition of thought. The aim is to define and name the contribution that Jullien makes to the tradition of comparative studies.

## F. JULLIEN'S CONCEPTUAL TOOLBOX AND METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Discussing Jullien's work, Marcel Gouchet treats it as a new and compelling program, equal in importance to the works of the prominent French sinologist and comparativist Marcel Granet and the leaders of the famous French school of sociology, Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, calling it the Western School of Decentralization (2011: 174–175). Drawing on the works of the most prominent humanitarians of the 20th century, primarily French theorists Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jullien seeks a deeper understanding of Western and Chinese civilisations, choosing various research methods to achieve this goal. Jullien seeks a deeper understanding of Western and Chinese civilisations and chooses various research methods to achieve this goal, creating his own individual methodological strategy. Being both a Hellenist and a sinologist, Jullien draws on the resources of both Western humanities and Chinese thought in his quest to take a fresh look at the phenomena characteristic of Chinese civilisation: the flow of energy, movement, transition from one opposite pole to another, and various continuous modifications manifested in playful variations in reality. It is important to note that he is not concerned with comparing the similarities and differences between cultures or civilisations, but rather, based on his own methodology of thought from without (*penser d'un dehors*), with disrupting Western thinking by penetrating and breaking it down from the outside.

When discussing his programmatic principles, Jullien often and publicly asserted that he came to sinology not out of a passion for Chinese matters, but out of a desire to gain a clearer understanding of the roots of his own tradition in Greek philosophy:

'I did not go to China to find Chinese thinking or escape from the European one. On the contrary, it was a way for me to look at the European philosophy differently. It was a way to deconstruct European thinking from the outside. We know what it means to deconstruct ourselves from within. The modern European tradition is characterized by a great movement between Athens and Jerusalem, the Grecians and Jews, Socrates and Abraham. For me, it was a different philosophical strategy to access other terms of the origin of the matter, so that I could go beyond the bounds of Greek thinking and look outside from it' (Acus, Jullien: 2018).

In this way, he echoes the demand expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their work *Qu'est que la Philosophie? (What is Philosophy?)* (1991) that philosophers must create philosophical concepts and conceptual characters that can be used to analyse the problems of their time. First of all, he relies on common French words, charging them with new philosophical energy. Thus, his theoretical toolkit includes various concepts for analysing the peculiarities of civilisations: *a logique du procès* (the logic of process), *autre* (other), *deranger* (to disturb), *detour* (detour), *dé-fixation* (de-fixation), *chantier* (yard), *fécondités* (fecundities), *l'amorce* (lure, trigger), *l'au-delà* (to go beyond), *dé-coïncidence* (de-coincidence), *la coïncidence* (the coincidence), *la compossibilité* (compossibility), meaning the possible non-separation of opposites

that would otherwise eliminate each other; a term confirming the existence of several contradictory worlds/states), *prise par déprise* (winning through losing), *la déprise* (loss), *le biais* (indirectness), *le dehors* (the outside, the margin), *le semblable* (the similar) *l'allusif* (allusive), *l'allusivité* (allusivity), *l'amorce* (lure, trigger), *l'entre* (in-betweenness, the between), *l'envers* (the wrong site), *l'essor* (soaring), *l'écart* (distance, discrepancy, deviation), *la création* (creation), *l'efficacité* (efficacy), *l'influence* (influence), *le foncier/le fond(s)* (ground, 'foundation-fourth' source), *l'impense* (unthought), *l'intime* (intimacy), *l'unite* (unity, unanimity), *l'oblique* (obliquity), *la propension* (propensity), *la disponibilité* (availability), *le sas* (sluice chamber or 'space in between' where everything becomes complex and ambiguous), *la tension* (the tension), *la transformation silencieuse* (the silent transformation), *ressources* (resources), *paysage* (landscape), *vivre* (living) and others. They allow him to create an individual philosophical toolkit that enables him to look at the relationship between Western and Eastern civilisations from a different perspective of transculturalism.

He describes his immersion in Chinese philosophy as a 'never-ending journey' that provides an ideal opportunity to look at the Western philosophical tradition from the outside, because the Indo-European syntax and etymology of Western thought did not shape Chinese philosophy. Western civilisation has only influenced China in modern times. Until then, Chinese thought had no connection with Western civilisations.

His philosophical construction yard (*chantier*) is not so much about comparing cultures as it is about bringing them together to explore the connections between Chinese and European thinking and outline a common field of reflection. This work encourages him to explore a wide variety of disciplines – ethics, aesthetics, diplomacy, historical and natural systems of thought (*pensées*), and the art of war. The goal of such 'deconstruction' from the outside (*du dehors*) is to uncover the biases hidden in both cultures and to reveal what is unthought (*l'impensé*) in our thinking. This process seeks to reveal the resources (*ressources*) and fecundities (*fécondités*) of languages and cultures, rather than merely considering them from the perspective of sameness and difference. At the same time, it is an attempt to diagnose clichés in thinking, to cleanse it of facile concepts or obviousness (*évidences*), and to pull it out of the swamp of atavisms. Highlighting the distances, gaps and spaces between cultures forces our thinking to be constantly tense and creative, and leads Jullien himself to the creation of a certain common existential or philosophy of life (*philosophie du vivre*), in which new reflections on intimacy (*l'intime*) or 'landscape' (*paysage*) emerge.

Jullien's main goal is to use China as a reference point to move around and to grasp what remains unthought (*l'impense*) in the tradition of Western civilisation, which was formed on the foundations of ancient Greek civilisation. This creates the opportunity to direct one's gaze to China as if into a mirror and see the world around and oneself from the outside (*du dehors*), the European border.

## CHINA AS THE ABSOLUTE OTHER AND POSSIBILITY FOR SELF- REFLECTION OF THE WEST IN JULLIEN'S THEORY

Jullien's goal is to consider what is unthought (*l'impense*) in Western thinking, which arose on the foundations laid by Greece. To achieve this goal, China offers a diagonal path, an opportunity to look at oneself and see oneself from the outside. The philosopher's priority is to constitute this exteriority, while the rest of his work consists of reevaluating the foundations of European thought. At the distant end of this path, common questions arise: Does 'universality'

exist, what could be 'common' to us, what is the meaning of 'unity', 'difference', or 'correspondence'? What we now call 'cultural dialogue' is at the heart of Jullien's concerns, which is why he is so relevant today. By re-evaluating Western philosophy and examining it on the basis of traditions of thought that have developed from fundamentally different concepts and contexts, Julien opens up space for a new way of thinking that encourages scholars to take an interest in both Western and Eastern philosophy. In works such as *The Propensity of Things (Toward a History of Efficacy in China)* (1995), *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (2000), *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese thought and Aesthetics* (2004), *A Treatise on Efficacy, Between Western and Chinese Thinking* (2004), *Vital Nourishment, Departing from Happiness* (2007), *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject Through Painting* (2009), *The Silent Transformations* (2011), the theorist re-actualises Western philosophy by examining it in the light of traditions of thought that have formed in the context of fundamentally different concepts and contrasts. He does not believe in the terms of identity and difference, as traditional comparativism does, and gives preference to the concepts of *l'écart* (the gap), *l'entre* (the space between) and *la tension* (the tension) (of resources). In Jullien's view, cultures are primarily sources of fertility. Prosperous thinking can be developed by drawing on both Chinese and Greek concepts, incorporating them into a process of mutual circulation. This, according to Jullien, is the calling and challenge of today's thinking: to take advantage of other civilisations and force different ideas to circulate by exploring and exploiting them, introducing them into new areas of thought. In creating his conceptual toolkit in his works, he also draws on the resources of Chinese thought, emphasising that, unlike the classical Western tradition of thought, he knows how to perceive the movement, the flow of energy, the transition from one opposite pole to another, and the various continuous modifications that manifest themselves in playful variations in reality. Chinese thinking has its own consistency, which was formed outside the boundaries of Western thinking.

Unlike Western categories of thought, Jullien defined 'China' as a world of becoming, invisibility and conservatism to which one must adapt: the only reality is the continuous flow of things and 'process', as the fundamental representation of the worldview in China or creation (as an anthropological and philosophical model known elsewhere, especially in the West) (Jullien 2007: 519). In preparing a direct encounter between Chinese and European traditions of thought, he developed the working hypothesis that the Chinese language is the absolute other of the Greek language, and that internal knowledge of Chinese is equivalent to the deconstruction of Greek thought and language from the outside (*du dehors*). The aim is to bring representatives of Chinese and Indo-European languages to consider and reflect on each other. This means establishing a perspective of thinking in which they would examine each other's theoretical shifts and hidden choices that formed the basis of their own systems of thought. For Jullien, this is what returning to one's own unthought (*l'impense*) means. In this way, each civilisation deconstructs itself through the other. In other words, he calls the unthinkable that which a person thinks on the basis of and does not take into account, but on which his own thinking is built. To this end, China offers a diagonal path, an opportunity to look at oneself and see oneself from the outside. Jullien's priority is to define and establish this exteriority, while the rest of his work consists of re-evaluating the foundations of European thought. At the distant end of this path, questions arise that directly concern us: does a common 'universality' exist, what is the meaning of 'unity', 'difference', or 'correspondence'? What we now call 'cultural dialogue' is at the heart of this philosopher's concerns, and it is precisely because of this recurring theme that his works are so relevant to us today.

In their efforts to understand the differences between Western and Chinese thinking in comparative studies, scholars have long recognised a certain difference between Western and Chinese civilisations, determined by the relationship between language and thinking. As Antanas Andrijauskas notes:

'First of all, unlike Indian civilization, Chinese civilization is not linguistically related to the Indo-European languages spoken by the nations of Western civilization. It is a different, relatively more closed world, defined by the influence of visual ideographic hieroglyphic language signs, which differs significantly in its languages, thinking, aesthetics, art, and other cultural traditions from what we see in the civilizational worlds of the Middle East, India, and the West' (Andrijauskas 2015: 22).

Thus, the essential difference is that Greek thought introduced order into becoming from the outside (on the basis of numbers, ideas and forms), whereas in Chinese thought order is conceived as lying within becoming; it is what makes becoming a process. One could say – metaphorically, at least – that Greek thought was marked by the idea, at once tragic and beautiful, of 'measure' attempting to impose itself on chaos. In contrast, Chinese thought became sensitive early on to the regular, spontaneous fecundity stemming simply from the alternation of the seasons (Jullien 1995: 217).

Jullien notes that in Chinese thinking, transformation is universal, progressive, lasting for a certain period of time, and arising from the interconnection of factors. Since 'everything' in it transforms spontaneously, it is never sufficiently differentiated to be perceived. Analysing silent transformations and recalling the Daoists, he convincingly explains how European metaphysicians often found it difficult to understand that, without expressing itself in the language of Being, Chinese thinking, on the contrary, easily takes into account the state of what we see but do not notice, or what we hear but do not listen to:

'Not expressing itself in the language of Being, Chinese thought is by contrast at ease in taking account of the state of, what one sees but does not perceive' or of, what one listens to but does not hear': that state where the perceptible breaks up and loses its specificity, disqualifies itself, 'loses its taste', without for all that lapsing into the invisible of metaphysics; where the demarcations are undone and which, through its indifferentiation, allows the incessant transition of things to appear (Lao-tzu 14: 16)' (Jullien 2011: 33).

In Eastern cultures, language primarily related to the natural environment. Jullien asserts that it is 'a language with almost no grammar, a language with no cases or syllables, which morphologically marks neither passive nor active, neither plural nor singular, neither tense nor mood' (Jullien 2015: 93). Classical Chinese uses very few adverbs and conjunctions. There are no verb tenses and the main concept is duration. This requires paying a close attention to what is said and written, as well as to the context. Jullien also points out the important fact that Chinese does not have a noun 'being' in the absolute sense, but rather only a predicate. From the thinker's point of view, Westerners fail to notice the impact of changes that accumulate over time because Western thinking is based on classical Greek philosophy of being, which encourages thinking in defined forms and ignores the uncertainty of ongoing changes. In contrast, Chinese thinking, with its greater understanding of the transience of life, offers a more flexible way of understanding everyday changes and provides insightful perspectives from which to consider our relationship with history and nature. In Chinese logic, everything is conditional and complex, and we are part of a process that is never closed, always open

to new combinations. Their thinking allows us to discover that there may be cases where it is more effective to surrender to situations rather than confront them directly. The Chinese perceived reality based on the tendency to develop rather than to be, so they gave priority not to the status of identity, but to the process of inclination. In creating his conceptual toolkit and drawing on the resources of Chinese thinking, Jullien seeks to understand the movement characteristic of this civilisation, the flow of energy, the transition from one opposite pole to another, the various continuous modifications that manifest themselves in playful variations in reality.

In Chinese, there are also no abstract concepts of time and space, but at the same time space and time are always present in a qualitative way, in the form of places and moments. Time is understood as eras, seasons and epochs, and spaces as areas, climates and orientations. Space and time are always interconnected: each period is associated with a climate. When it comes to time, the main concepts are moment-occasion and duration. It is necessary to follow the natural course, and not to impose one's will on it. Everything is immanent. Time is understood as 'between moments', i.e. when transitions. Our presence in the world is seasonal, which means that our vital rhythm is marked by the transition from one season to another. There is no concept of continuity of space or time. The cyclical nature is marked by this idea of transition, which is neither a circular nor a linear process. Everything is a transformation in which continuity and modification occur simultaneously. Everything is based on the existence of two principles, *yin* and *yang*, and the change in the dominant action.

Reflecting on the differences between Chinese and Greek thinking, Jullien writes:

'Thus, the essential difference is that Greek thought introduced order into becoming from the outside (on the basis of numbers, ideas, forms), whereas in Chinese thought order is conceived as lying within becoming; it is what makes becoming a process. One could say – metaphorically, at least – that Greek thought was marked by the idea, at once tragic and beautiful, of „measure“ attempting to impose itself on chaos. In contrast, Chinese thought became sensitive early on to the regular, spontaneous fecundity stemming simply from the alternation of the seasons' (Jullien 1995: 217).

It is important to note that Jullien sharply criticises the Eurocentrism of Western philosophy and its insufficient understanding of the reality of Chinese philosophy, reminding us that:

Contrary to what the history of (Western) philosophy claims, according to which philosophy originated differently, namely that it first appeared in the East but was actually born only in Greece, with the rapid emergence of the concept; so, contrary to this *doxa*, which Deleuze repeats after Merleau-Ponty in his beautiful 'geophilosophy', the East did not remain in a 'pre-philosophical' stage. It invented its own signs of abstraction and experienced a variety of schools: thus, it did not remain on the threshold of philosophy or in its 'infancy' (Jullien 2013: 16, translated by the author).

In an effort to identify the most significant differences between Western and Chinese traditions of thought, Jullien asserts:

'Greek thinking, based on its choices and the principle of partiality, found it more convenient to think, for example, about determination and modeling (mathematization), on which classical science was based; However, because of this (*contre-cout*), compared to Chinese thinking, it also found itself in a difficult position when thinking, for example, about the phenomena of silent transformation and transition, or about incitement from a distance and influence' (ibid.: 44).

Wu, a critic of Jullien's works, emphasises that Jullien applies a unique approach to the study of China, namely a dialogical approach in which China is considered a 'method' (Wu 2023: 25). According to him, Jullien views Chinese thinking as a paradigm and a unique method, which, drawing inspiration from China, seeks to reflect on the West and promote understanding and dialogue between different cultures, thus opening up new academic horizons. Wu distinguishes between the traditional Western scholarly approach to China as an 'object' and Jullien's approach to China as a 'method'. According to him, in Jullien's methodology, China is considered a philosophical tool, and sinology is a method of reflection (Wu 2023: 35–41). This is an attempt to think about the 'unthinkable' of ontology through what Jullien calls *vis-à-vis*, suspended in productive tension, dialogue. In philosophy, the other is brought into an exclusive dialectical relationship through oppositions. This practice, carried out in the philosopher's research, 'has brought Chinese studies out of a marginalised field and into the foreground of more general philosophical discussions, providing methodological implications not only for Chinese studies but also for theoretical research in general' (ibid.: 97). Jullien's method of interpreting China and his quest to understand both Eastern and Western intellectual heritage demonstrate the need to change the Eurocentric theoretical and epistemological system by creating a transcultural research paradigm based on cultural pluralism and mutual communication. In this new paradigm, China becomes the centre of dialogue between East and West and a method for understanding the world and humanity's place in it. Jullien's comparative perspective gives us an 'outside' that allows us to see the 'inside' more clearly, and in which our own perspective seems 'strange' and motivates us to go beyond its limits and discover a new approach.

## CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the Chinese tradition of thought, Jullien seeks to enrich the Western tradition of thought with new ideas and to challenge traditional comparative studies by creating new concepts. By developing his own individual methodology, he seeks to allow us to look at the heritage of Western thought from the outside, taking a detour to discover what has not yet been thought. In other words, he seeks to place himself in a position where he can study Western thought from the perspective of different Chinese traditions of thought. Jullien defines China as a world of conservatism, becoming and invisibility, whose only reality is the constant flow of things to which one must adapt. By analysing various Chinese texts and applying their intuitive insights to the rational Western tradition of thought, Jullien attempts to highlight the differences between the two civilisations and the possibilities for comparison. Based on the statements of thinkers from different civilisations and periods, he records their unequal existential experiences, which allow him to describe China as completely different from the Western perspective. At the same time, this critical comparison reveals 'unthinkable' elements within Western philosophy. This thinker's methodological strategy deconstructs the rigid norms of Western thinking and opens the way for new research opportunities.

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#### TAUTVYDAS VĖŽELIS

## Kinija kaip absoliutus Kitas ir Vakarų veidrodis François Jullieno teorijoje

*Santrauka*

Šiame straipsnyje siekiama apibrėžti ir įvardyti prancūzų sinologo ir teoretiko François Jullieno įnašą į komparatyvistinių studijų tyrimų lauką, analizuojant Kinijos ir Vakarų civilizacijų sankirtas. Atskleidžiama, kaip šis teoretikas, remdamasis kinų mąstymo tradicija ir kurdamas naujus konceptus ir individualią metodologiją, meta iššūkį tradicinėms lyginamosioms studijoms, atverdamas galimybes pažvelgti į Vakarų civilizacijos mąstymo paveldą iš išorinės perspektyvos bei atrasti tai, kas joje buvo nemastytą. Toks griežtas tradicinių Vakarų mąstymo normų dekonstravimas atveria kelią naujoms skirtingų civilizacijų tyrimų galimybėms.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** konceptas, dialogas, François Jullienas, Rytai, Vakarai