

UNIVERSALITY, UNIFORMITY, COMMONALITIES – WHAT DOES THE DIALOGUE OF THE  
CULTURES MEAN?

*François Jullien at Budapest*

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François Jullien is an outstanding figure of the French contemporary philosophy and China-expert. The author of more than 20 volumes, and a member of numerous academies.<sup>1</sup> The topic of his two lectures at Budapest was the dialogue between China and Europe, as well as the deconstruction of the European thinking.

According to his thesis, for the European people, the unspoken assumptions (*impensés*) of their own thinking can not be seen from the inside, just from a different way of thinking. That is why we have to make a detour so we can reflect on the European specialties in a new way. The Chinese way of thinking is the most suitable because both by linguistically, both by the intellectual history it is the furthest from us. The European thinking originates in the Greek and Hebrew culture, like that its main characteristic is to think in models, what they want to make comply with the reality and vice versa. Contrary, for the Chinese reasoning there is no permanent, the reality appear as a process.<sup>2</sup> The existence, the justice, the time, the self, the freedom, the law, the god is not a relevant category in every culture. The debate built on the confrontation of contradictory ideologies - what is particularly important for the French - is incompatible with the Chinese concept of wisdom. The wise is a person "without quality" who avoids the predilection and the level of details, who takes the proper position in the situations, who is never committed to value system.<sup>3</sup> The three basic questions of I. Kant: what I have to know, what I have to do, what I have to hope, are not formulated in the Chinese culture neither. The base of the two thinking is different, and for getting a common denominator the dialogue is inevitable. For this there is a need for an externally performed deconstruction.<sup>4</sup> The foundation of this is the difference. The difference is a kind of making of distance, a work made inside but observing the outside, during which we take in to consideration the specialties of the two sides.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle describes the existence by two meanings: it is equally the existence and the auxiliary verb of the predication. B. Russel calls it the regrettable fact of the human kind that "*it uses the expression of existence in the meaning of preaching and identification.*" According to F. Jullien B. Russel made a mistake when he extended this statement to the whole human race, namely because the two meanings of existence splits in the Chinese language. The existence is not an absolute concept for them; the existence is not determined as

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<sup>1</sup> He was born at the 2th of June, 1951 at Embrun. After finishing the École Normale Supérieure he continued his studies at Beijing and Shanghai. From 1988 to 1990 he was the president of the French China-studies, between 1990-2000 the director of the South-Asia Research Institute of the University of Paris VII, between 1995-1998 the president of the CIPh. At the moment he is a professor of the Paris Diderot University and the director of the IPC and the Marcel-Garnet Central. At 2010 he was honored with the prize of Hannah Arendt for his activity in the field of political philosophy. At the 20 of October, 2011 he gave a lecture at the French Institute, then at 21th of October at the Faculty of Arts of ELTE. The first was advertised with the title "*Universality, uniformity, commonalities – What does the dialogue of the cultures mean?*" and the second with the title "*The deconstruction from the outside - Reflection on the history of the prejudice of the European thinking*".

<sup>2</sup> These thesis ideas of François Jullien are high-lightened by Tilmann J. A. as well in his article: „China fills me with anxiety” in: *Élet és Irodalom*, LV. volume 37. September 16, 2011. URL.: [http://www.es.hu/tillmann\\_j\\_a;8222;kina\\_nyugetalansaggal\\_tolt\\_el8221;;2011-09-14.html](http://www.es.hu/tillmann_j_a;8222;kina_nyugetalansaggal_tolt_el8221;;2011-09-14.html)

<sup>3</sup> The famous indifference of the Chinese against the missionaries illustrates this. Jullien made a reference to this in his book: *Éloge de la fadeur*, Picquier, 1991, *Le livre de poche*, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The base of this is the deconstruction of Derrida, Heidegger.

<sup>5</sup> The thinking of F. Jullien is characterized by not pursuing the artistic language, but trying to explore its special logic. For example, when translating a Chinese poem to French, the signal of the plural form – what does not exist in the Chinese language – is put into parenthesis.

something existing. The Chinese thinking goes beyond the question of existence and justice. That is not refusal, only indifference. Proves this, that in the antiquity the school dealing with mathematics, geometrics and the concept of justice was working in China as well, but contrary to the Greek, the Chinese did not develop further the problem of justice. The school noticed the opportunity, but did not use the option. We should perceive this not as a shortcoming, but as a different way, according to F. Jullien.

The difference can be detected at the category of time as well. In the European thinking three time-concepts can be distinguished. In Aristotle's view time is a natural factor, what typifies the movement of bodies. The concept of time is vague, because the borders of subdivision could slip: "*the time has to be existing, since it is distributable, but the distribution itself does not exist.*" But in the views of Platon and Plotinos time can be detected in change and eternity. The characteristic of Indo-European languages is that they can detect the past, present and future by the inflection. The European thinking pursues to designate the borders, the beginning and the end. Being means to be specified. We apprehend the snow break as a state between ice and water, not as a transition. According to Plato getting up is the act of upswing from motionless to motion, what happens overnight, a sort of moment out of time. Life is the progress, getting from somewhere to somewhere. The concept of transition is problematic for the European thinking: Aristotle can only conceive the transition between two poles with installing a third term, the subject. Kant puts it in the *Critic of Pure Reason* that while aging the *subjectum* stays the same, only its features change: the black hair gets grey, the smooth skin wrinkles. On the contrary, the Chinese perceive the time as a transition, transformation. The transition is the undetermined, the already not, yet not. A sort of continuity which generates itself. That is why death in the Chinese language does not mean the end point, but a sort of transformation. The time for them means a period of time, an interval (*saison*), or the passing of time itself. They do not know the term of abstract time of Aristotle. There is always only something what has time and duration. The subjective time perception of Saint Augustine approximates to this time concept. For him the time is a sort of expansion (*distention animi*) and the protection of the mind.<sup>6</sup>

The difference of the two thinking shows in the view of history too. The Chinese, contrary to the European, do not think in radical events, spectacular disruptions, but rather in quite metamorphosis, small corrections. The phenomenon of quite change can be detected in the process of the European psychoanalytic therapy too. The patient does not experience impressive results immediately, but rather slowly, after time they can feel the effect of the therapy.

In his lecture given in the French Institutue, F. Jullien referred to the European reception of the Chinese thinking. He highlighted the idea of Foucault what tells: "*China is not only different, but it is at somewhere else too*" (*Words and things*). He imagined the Chinese culture not as a utopia, but as a heterotopy, opposite to the enlightenment and Maoism.<sup>7</sup> In the history of philosophy the idea of the offset progression is typical. According to G. W. F. Hegel the thinking got into the level of concepts at the Greeks: "*The philosophy was born at the East, but started at the West.*" In the case of E. Husserl F. Jullien pointed out the importance of the experience of wonderment in the European reasoning. The anti-Hegelian G. Deleuze in his work "*What is philosophy?*" does not talk about the Greek miracle and its historical necessity, but concluded that the Eastern thought stayed in a pre-philosophic state. The Chinese reception of the European reasoning started relatively late, in the 19th century. At this time the works of the European philosophers had been translated falsely many times, since they did not have a word for many European terms. For example for the platonic eros term or for the justice, they translated the latter as harmony with the nature.

Beside this F. Jullien attempts to delimit the term of universalism (*universel*). First he isolated it from expressions of unity (*uniforme*) and community (*commun*).<sup>8</sup> The unification means standardization and applies mainly for products, what become all the same everywhere because of the globalization, for example – he says – in China the same volumes of Harry Potter look down on us from the shelves as at home. We use the term of community primarily in political sense: European community, the community of people, local community etc. The community delimits, hence at the same time excludes. On the contrary the philosophic terminus of universalism is a sort of agreement, which is not imperative and not general, and for what different concepts were made in history. After the pre-Socratic "everything" and the theory of Socrates the design of the Roman law came, what's important station was the edict of Caracalla at 212, what expanded

<sup>6</sup> He professes the vagueness of the term when he thinks like this: "What is then the time? If nobody asks, I know; if they ask me, and I want to explain it, I cannot."

<sup>7</sup> F. Jullien is more optimist than Foucault, because he thinks the Chinese way of thinking can be learnt by the Europeans.

<sup>8</sup> He refers here to his following work: *De l'universel, de l'uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Fayard, 2008.

the roman civil law to every free inhabitant born in the territory of the Roman Empire. It was replaced with the Christian perception of Paul, what emphasizes the universality of love regardless to gender, origins. The individual reincarnated in the universalism: Jesus is a flesh and blood human and god at the same time. The model of the universalism is heterogenic and panoramic, what the lamb-worship table of the altar of Gent displays.<sup>9</sup> In the centre of the picture stands the Lamb of God, who takes away the guilt of the world. The people with different ranks and occupations: leaders, solitaires, knights, lords, judges, are approaching it.

Secondly, he distinguishes the positive and negative perceptions of universalism. The positive universalism is the infant of the enlightenment and advertizes the emancipation of the individual values and making them universal. Its fruit is the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* at 1789, what is a historical document and ideology at the same time. This latter later became the subject of criticism many times (marxist, feminist, etc). The claims of the *Declaration* became more modest today, and according to Marcel Gauchet besides the minimal human and civil rights we have to distinguish the relative rights. According to this F. Jullien warns the difficulty of demarcation. The negative approach is to say no to the unbearable. The one who does not approach for the kid falling to the well instinctively, is not human, says a Chinese wisdom. It does not develop a definition, but rather shows the completeness in the negative.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese ideology aspires to make harmony, integration and treats the human in its own context, contrary to the European, what isolates the individual.

The universalism exist in a progress, we can never possess it entirely. If it stiffens, it dies, just like the language. F. Jullien wants to unfold the variation (*égard*) between the European and Far-Eastern reasoning, and not its difference (*différence*).<sup>11</sup> In the *dialogos* the *logos* – the opportunity of the common speech – and the *dia* – the deviation, the opposition – are equally important. He conceives the globalization as the interdependence of the different understands, and not the uniformalization of the cultures.<sup>12</sup> He does not believe in soft humanism and synthesis, what is unproductive and boring. The aim of his strategy is to unfold the radical differences of the two cultures and then to make a common ideology and enrich each others' experiences.

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Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*

<sup>9</sup> Hubert and Jan van Eyck, stretched out 375 x 200 cm, oil, wood, Cathedral of Saint Bravo, Gent, 1432

<sup>10</sup> We can find examples for this at Mancius (B.C. 380-289)

<sup>11</sup> In his view Europe and France started to deal with other cultures only when its power started to decline.

<sup>12</sup> This idea has been said in the dialogue of Francois Jullian and Roman Herzog: Ford.: Hidas Zoltán. In: *2000 irodalmi és társadalmi havilap*, 2005/3. szám. URL: MATARKA: [http://www.ketezer.hu/menu4/2005\\_03/Jullien\\_Herzog.html](http://www.ketezer.hu/menu4/2005_03/Jullien_Herzog.html)