

Experience and subjectivity: François Jullien and Jean François Billeter

Baptiste Mèlès (Clermont-Ferrand II)

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Introduction¹

The concept of subjectivity as we know it, especially since Descartes, does not appear as such in ancient Chinese thought. In Confucius’ and his followers’ work, it can not be found anywhere: there is no universal form of subjectivity, but always princes or subjects, parents or children, husbands or wives, elder or younger brothers. With the exception of friendship, no social relationship is symmetrical: there are as many kinds of subjectivity as kinds or social relationship (五倫 *wǔlún*). What comes closer to the Western notion of

¹The author would like to thank Jean François Billeter for his benevolent and critical proofreading, Marion Duquerroy and Xiè Jīng (谢晶) for their careful advice and patience.

subjectivity appears much later, under the influence of Indian philosophy, especially Buddhism.

But the fact that subjectivity is not explicitly expressed does not imply that one can do without it. Subjectivity may remain hidden, or implicit, awaiting to be revealed by commentators. Thus, what is in stake is not to know if subjectivity has been theorized by Chinese thinkers, but rather to know if sinology may use this concept as a principle when studying Chinese classics.

This question was recently raised in the controversy between two sinologists, the Swiss Jean François Billeter (born in 1939) and the French François Jullien (born in 1951). The general public heard of it for the first time when Billeter's book *Contre François Jullien* was published in 2006; but the controversy has begun much sooner, twenty years ago, in 1989, in the French journal *Études chinoises*.

Here will be briefly exposed the works of both sinologists, especially from a methodological point of view, and then the controversies that, as we will see, emerged quite naturally. We will finally examine if the existence of subjectivity in ancient Chinese thought is a merely sinological question, or more generally a philosophical one.

1 Antithetic methods

1.1 François Jullien's conceptual method

François Jullien frequently explained why he first decided to study Chinese thought.² After passing the French *agrégation* of philosophy, intending to know the foundations of the Western way of thinking, he planned to discover some other ways of thinking, and wondered where he could find them. The scope statement was to find some written culture, which would have not been linked to our history for a long time. Biblical, Hebraic, Arabic cultures were thus excluded. Indian culture was too close as well, Sanskrit being an Indo-European language. And as Japanese culture was partly influenced by China, he decided to study the later one.

“Another ways of thinking”: this idea may justifiably remind of Foucault's injunction to “think differently” (*penser autrement*).³ And Jullien makes no secret of this influence: he regularly quotes the few lines Foucault

²See for example François Jullien, *Conférence sur l'efficacité*, Opus, reprinted in *La Philosophie inquiétée par la pensée chinoise*, Paris: Seuil, 2009 (2005), p. 11; and almost every interview with this author.

³See, among others, Michel Foucault, “Le Philosophe masqué”, in: *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988*, Quarto, Paris: Gallimard, 2001 (1994), pp. 923–929, p. 929; and Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, II : L'Usage des plaisirs*, Tel, Paris: Gallimard, 1984, Introduction, pp. 16 and 19.

wrote about Chinese heterotopia, at the beginning of *Les Mots et les choses*.⁴ Maybe Jullien’s project was also influenced by Heidegger’s questions about Eastern tradition. China would have been for him a mean for acquiring, by comparison, a better knowledge of Greece. When wanting to know our actual way of thinking, Foucault had been investigating into history, comparing for example biology with natural history. Wanting to become aware of the structural characteristics of European philosophy, Jullien compared it with Chinese thought. All in all, Jullien sought in space what Foucault sought in time.

By method, what interests Jullien is Chinese thought as a tradition,⁵ rather than individual thinkers as individuals. This often leads him to attribute to Chinese thought what he has shown for one thinker. The book *Procès ou création* is thus subtitled as *An introduction to Chinese literate thought*, even though its unique object is Wáng Fūzhī (王夫之, 1619–1692).⁶ Wáng Fūzhī does not seem to be described for himself, but as an example, as a typical case.

Intending to highlight what constitutes Chinese thought as a tradition, Jullien almost always reads Chinese classics with the help of commentators. As an example, the *Yijing* (易經) is seen through Wáng Fūzhī’s eyes in *Figures de l’immanence*.⁷ Jullien’s goal is to show what kinds of fundamental concepts are used by Chinese classics as well as by their commentators.

The main theses of Jullien’s work are quite well-known. The ancient Chinese thought would be a thought of immanence, whereas European philosophy has been for a long time — and maybe always is — a thought of transcendence, be it the transcendence of God or the transcendence of subjectivity.⁸ The Chinese thinkers often show continuity between oppo-

⁴Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Tel, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, Preface, p. 9. See for example Jullien, op. cit., p. 14; François Jullien, *Chemin faisant. Connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie. Réplique à ****, L’Ordre philosophique, Paris: Seuil, 2007, IV, p. 34; François Jullien, *La Philosophie inquiétée par la pensée chinoise*, Opus, Paris: Seuil, 2009, Preface, p. III; and many interviews with François Jullien.

⁵François Jullien, “La Chine au miroir de l’Occident”, in: *Le Monde diplomatique* (Oct. 2006), pp. 22–23, URL: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2006/10/JULLIEN/14010>: “I still dare to use this word [“tradition”], against Michel Foucault’s will, because a tradition is precisely perceived *from outside*.” See also François Jullien, *De l’Universel, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Paris: Fayard, 2008, XIII, p. 263: this word is relevant to compare cultures, although it is not for describing one of them from inside. Jullien probably alludes to Foucault’s critic of the notion of “tradition,” in Michel Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir*, NRF, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, II, I, pp. 31–32.

⁶François Jullien, *Procès ou création. Une introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois*, Des Travaux, Paris: Seuil, 1989.

⁷François Jullien, *Figures de l’immanence. Pour une lecture philosophique du Yi King, le Classique du changement*, Biblio Essais, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995 (1993).

⁸Especially see Jullien, *Procès ou création. Une introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois*; Jullien, *Figures de l’immanence. Pour une lecture philosophique du Yi King, le Classique du changement*; François Jullien, *Zhongyong. La Régulation à usage ordinaire*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1993; and *passim* in Jullien’s work.

sites, whereas the Western thought often radically distinguishes concepts, as substance and accident, being and nothingness, time and space, etc. In particular, the ancient Chinese thought did not distinguish subject from object, and did not conceive the notion of an abstract and universal subject.

Nevertheless, what we would like to underline is not really the thesis to which Jullien arrives, but the method he uses. There is a few texts in which Jullien speaks from experience, an experience which may be considered as pre-discursive; for instance, when comparing Mencius (孟子 Mèngzǐ, 380–289 BC) with Rousseau.⁹ But in general, Jullien avoids speaking about experience, as well as Foucault in his *Archéologie du savoir*.¹⁰

Even though Jullien avoids to express this in such abstract words, he seems to think that in a way, discourse precedes experience. Experiences are built of words and traditions. Jullien claims for the inheritance of Nietzsche, and reads Chinese texts as a philologist. He avoids to use the notion of experience, which may let one think that there is something universal before the discourse; without excluding it, Jullien refuses to presuppose it. As a philologist, he highlights the role of words, of concepts. There is no innocent word: if Zhuāngzǐ (莊子, IVth century BC) or Wáng Fūzhī regularly use the word of *dào* (道), one can suppose it is a fundamental concept, and examine both what these occurrences have in common and what this notion may mean in an abstract sense.

Jullien's theory of translation is a natural consequence of his philological method. Translation should fulfill two demands. The first one is to keep the importance of a word: almost each time the same Chinese word is used, it should be translated by the same French word. The second one is to keep the relative independance of two philosophical lexicons; by using the words of God, being, subject or some other capital concepts of Western philosophy, we could nothing but misinterpret what makes Chinese thought special, what constitutes it in itself. Translations must keep something idiomatic. This is the reason why Jullien often uses French words which do not belong to the classical philosophical lexicon, but to biology or other realms: "régulation,"¹¹ "procès,"¹² etc.

Not only Jullien finally observes no real subjectivity in ancient Chinese thought, but the lack of subjectivity has been made possible by his method itself. By method, Jullien has chosen to analyze Chinese thought from the concept point of view, much more than starting from the structure of conscience.

⁹François Jullien, *Dialogue sur la morale*, Biblio Essais, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998 (1995), III, p. 24; VIII, pp. 78ff.

¹⁰Foucault, op. cit., I, pp. 26–27; see also II, III, p. 64 and note 1.

¹¹Jullien, *Zhongyong. La Régulation à usage ordinaire*.

¹²Jullien, *Procès ou création. Une introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois*.

1.2 Jean François Billeter’s consciousness point of view

Unlike Jullien, Billeter does not study Chinese thought through a tradition. He never uses commentators, but always reads directly the texts themselves. Whereas Jullien partly seeks the meaning of a text in its outsides, Billeter exclusively searches for it in its inside.

But it is not enough to say that Billeter does not study China through a tradition: more than that, he often studies it going against the tradition. He thus frequently severely criticizes the Chinese tradition of thought, especially among Confucianists: Mencius is not only a poor philosopher, but a humourless hypocrite,¹³ while Zhū Xī (朱熹, 1130–1200) is a conservative ideologist.¹⁴ In this respect, Billeter’s point of view already differs from Jullien’s, who intends to take the tradition as it is, without choosing nor judging.

As a consequence, Billeter avoids to use classes of philosophical systems. The term of Confucianism must be avoided, because Confucius’ thought is very different from Mencius’, Mencius’ from Zhū Xī’s, and Zhū Xī’s from Zhāng Zǎi’s (張載, 1020–1077). Over more than 2000 years, the Confucian tradition was subjected to so many interpretations, so many external influences such as Daoism or Buddhism, that speaking of “one” Confucianism would be as deceptive as speaking of “one” platonism to involve the thoughts of Plato, Augustine, Leibniz, Frege and Gödel in one and only one system. The same is true concerning Daoism, even more than Confucianism.

And this seems to be a kind of bias in Billeter’s method. Going against the Chinese tradition, which used such abstract entities as Daoism (道家 *dào-jia*) or Confucianism (儒家 *rú-jia*), Billeter always speaks of mere individuals. Not Daoism, but Zhuāngzǐ. Not Confucianism, but Confucius.¹⁵ And a philosopher seems to be interesting to him as soon as he distances himself from a school. He became aware of Confucius’ depth when he separated him from Confucianism.¹⁶ He studied Zhuāngzǐ as a unique philosopher, very different from the “Daoist” which the later commentators would have constituted.¹⁷ And for the same reason, he could nothing but be fascinated by the personality of Lǐ Zhì (李贄, 1527–1602), dissident philosopher who refused the whole system of mandarinism, examinations and Confucianism.

Billeter’s first book was precisely focused on Lǐ Zhì.¹⁸ He described the

¹³Jean François Billeter, “Confucius : l’énigme”, in: *Études sur Tchouang-tseu*, Paris: Allia, 2006, pp. 163–192, especially pp. 176–177.

¹⁴Jean François Billeter, *Li Zhi, philosophe maudit (1527–1602). Contribution à une sociologie du mandarinat chinois de la fin des Ming*, Travaux de droit, d’économie, de sociologie et de sciences politiques, Genève: Droz, 1979, II, p. 53 n. 9 and pp. 88–89.

¹⁵This separation between Confucius and Confucianism, and the claim for following the Master against the tradition, was maybe inspired by Lǐ Zhì: *ibid.*, ch. x, p. 212.

¹⁶Billeter, “Confucius : l’énigme”, pp. 163–164.

¹⁷Jean François Billeter, *Leçons sur Tchouang-tseu*, Paris: Allia, 2004 (2002), IV, pp. 135ff.

¹⁸Billeter, *Li Zhi, philosophe maudit (1527–1602). Contribution à une sociologie du*

life of this philosopher, who began as a mandarine and was recognized as very talented. However he was putting on an act.¹⁹ Without believing in what he wrote in his essays, he just knew what was expected from him and came up to these expectations (a behaviour which may be common to many examinations, in all eras and places). Instead of making the very successful career he could have legitimately dreamt of, he chose to both leave and denounce the system in his books *A Book to Burn* (1590) and *A Book to Conceal* (1599).

What interested Billeter in Lǐ Zhì's work and life was this claim for individuality.²⁰ He studied Lǐ Zhì using some concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's work, and especially the notion of "symbolic capital;"²¹ he had in return some influence on Bourdieu, who entitled "A Book to Burn" the first chapter to his own book *Homo Academicus*.²² Bourdieu's concepts allow Billeter to consider Lǐ Zhì, neither as a mere free subject, nor as totally determined by some kind of structures, but as an agent, located in some social field, with which he can interact, accepting or refusing it; and also, by contrast, to explain the conservatism of Neo-Confucianism.

Much later, when Billeter studies Zhuāngzǐ, the same methodological principles may be observed. Billeter refuses to include Zhuāngzǐ in some abstract notion of Daoism, and studies him as an individual, separate from Lǎozǐ (老子) as well as from his own self-styled followers. Billeter explicitly intends to understand Zhuāngzǐ better than two millenia of Chinese commentaries and about three centuries of Western interpretations, going alone against them all.²³ The least we can say is that Billeter is not very sensitive to the argument from authority.

But what is his secret? How is it that he can be so close to Zhuāngzǐ's private thoughts? Billeter's advice seems quite simple: use your imagination, use your experience. As an example, Billeter translates and comments a text from Zhuāngzǐ (III, 11), in which a cook who perfectly handles knives describes his art. Almost all translators make him say: "what interests me is the Way, not mere technique." But the very abstract notion of *dào* does not really help us to understand the meaning of his words. On the contrary, Billeter chooses to translate this sentence as "what interests me is how things work, not mere technique."²⁴ The translation is much more

mandarinat chinois de la fin des Ming.

¹⁹Ibid., ch. II, p. 52–53.

²⁰The existence of forms of subjectivity in Lǐ Zhì's work would not be surprising: this thinker was partly influenced by Buddhism and the "intuitionist" philosopher Wáng Yáng-míng (王陽明, 1472–1529). See *ibid.*, ch. II and X.

²¹Ibid., pp. 82ff.

²²Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Le Sens commun, Paris: Minuit, 1984.

²³Billeter, *Leçons sur Tchouang-tseu*, I, pp. 9–13.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 15ff.: "Ce qui intéresse votre serviteur, c'est le fonctionnement des choses, non la simple technique." A similar translation and interpretation may be found in Jean François Billeter, *L'Art chinois de l'écriture. Essai sur la calligraphie*, Paris: Skira/Seuil,

precise; what allowed such a precision is that Billeter used his imagination to figure out what the cook intended to say. This led him to remember how children gradually acquire gestural habits, such as filling glasses or cutting bread. With this method, Zhuāngzǐ’s book loses every abstraction, becomes close to us. Billeter’s thesis about Zhuāngzǐ is that his main theme is to constitute a phenomenology of activity: he describes different kinds and degrees of activity, from the usual, irreflexive and almost hypnotic²⁵ one to the most reflexive and conscious one.²⁶ These degrees of activity are kinds of intentionality: they constitute the way our consciousness relates to the world. Zhuāngzǐ thus describes subjectivity.²⁷ This subjectivity does never cease, even when Zhuāngzǐ teaches how to free oneself from the intentionality which is committed in our everyday activity:²⁸ “this experience does not make us discover some upper reality, but the source of our own subjectivity.”²⁹ As we can see, experience and subjectivity can not be separated in Billeter’s method.

Trusting experience, Billeter avoids to highlight concepts: he does not trust words, claiming to follow Wittgenstein’s critic of philosophy as being fooled by language. Even the term of *dào* should be almost each time translated by a different word.³⁰ Zhuāngzǐ does not only cease to be a daoist: he does not even speak of *dào* any more. His thought is a phenomenology much more than a daoism.

So, Billeter’s method’s originality is to widely use the notions of subjectivity and experience, each of them sustaining the other. The universality of subjectivity allows us to have, as an intuition, the experience of what Zhuāngzǐ thinks, because ancient Chinese and contemporary Swiss people share the same structures of consciousness. And the universality of experience makes us understand what special structures of subjectivity are implicitly described by Zhuāngzǐ. Zhuāngzǐ does not use the notion of subjectivity, but it does not prevent him, as a human being, to describe or comment it.

2001 (1989), IX, pp. 269ff. See also Jean François Billeter, “La traduction vue de près”, in: *Études sur Tchouang-tseu*, Paris: Allia, 2006, pp. 213–234, especially pp. 220–222, where Billeter avoids translating “*dào*” by the word of “Way” in a text from Mencius.

²⁵Jean François Billeter, *Études sur Tchouang-tseu*, Paris: Allia, 2006 (2004), I, pp. 16–19; and “Sur l’hypnose,” pp. 235–249.

²⁶Billeter, *Leçons sur Tchouang-tseu*, II, pp. 41ff.

²⁷Billeter, *Études sur Tchouang-tseu*, III, p. 106.

²⁸Ibid., III, p. 89, and IV, pp. 129ff.

²⁹Ibid., IV, p. 134.

³⁰Billeter, *Leçons sur Tchouang-tseu*, I, pp. 37–39.

2 Is Wáng Fūzhī a phenomenologist?

2.1 A phenomenological projection

One can easily see how far Jullien’s method is from Billeter’s. Jullien studies traditions, Billeter individuals. Jullien follows commentators, Billeter sidesteps them. Jullien avoids personal interpretation, Billeter claims for it. Jullien identifies concepts, Billeter avoids them; similarly, Billeter trusts experience, Jullien is wary of it. Jullien tries to keep an internal unity to his translations, even though the result may sound strange to us; Billeter prefers to have an immediately understandable translation, even though the original lexical field may be lost. So both sinologists could nothing but disagree.

But fortunate to us, they did not content themselves with disagreeing. They disputed. And this contest has been at least as instructive as their isolated works already were.

In 1989, Billeter publishes in the French sinological journal *Études chinoises* a review of Jullien’s book *Procès ou création*.³¹ At that time, Billeter still has some respect and admiration for Jullien. He recognizes the great value of this book from a sinological point of view,³² writing in particular that the chapter about the *Yijīng* is, “as far as I know, the best thing ever written in Western sinology about the philosophical interpretation of the *Yijīng*.”³³ So when Billeter, in 2006, pretends to doubt about Jullien’s sinological value, the polemic dimension of his judgement should not be forgotten.

After having spoken very highly of Jullien’s book, “from a sinological point of view,” Billeter comes to criticize it, “from a non-sinological point of view.” This critic consists in two points. The first one concerns the use of Wáng Fūzhī, not as a singular and original philosopher, but as a typical Chinese thinker. We have earlier underlined how important it was in Billeter’s method to isolate thinkers in order to see what was proper to each of them; this critic is thus not surprising from him. The second critic concerns Jullien’s reserve about one particular point in Wáng Fūzhī’s thought, which

³¹Jean François Billeter, “Comment lire Wang Fuzhi ?”, in: *Études chinoises* IX.1 (Mar. 1989), pp. 95–127, URL: <http://www.afec-en-ligne.org/IMG/pdf/9-1Billeter.pdf>.

³²Ibid., pp. 96ff.

³³Ibid., pp. 101ff. The controversy of 1989 was not enough to change Billeter’s mind about Jullien’s competence as a sinologist: in 1993, he still uses superlatives to mention Jullien’s article “‘Fonder’ la morale, ou comment légitimer la transcendance de la moralité sans le support du dogme ou de la foi — au travers du *Mencius*” (*Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, 6, 1985, pp. 23–81), in the review of Jörg Schumacher’s book *Über den Begriff des Nützlichen bei Mengzi*: “Il est [...] regrettable qu’il [Jörg Schumacher] ne cite pas l’étude de François Jullien sur Mencius, qui est à mon sens le meilleur essai de synthèse paru en langue occidentale, et ne nous dise pas en quoi les résultats de ses propres recherches complètent, corrigent ou remettent en cause la vision du *Mencius* proposée par François Jullien.” See Jean François Billeter, “Jörg Schumacher, *Über den Begriff des Nützlichen bei Mengzi*, Berne, 1993”, in: *Études chinoises* XII.2 (Sept. 1993), pp. 179–181, URL: <http://www.afec-en-ligne.org/IMG/pdf/12-2CR.pdf>, pp. 180–181.

will happen to highlight the very sticking point between Billeter and Jullien.

This particular point is some parallelism Jullien observes in Wáng Fūzhī's thought, about the relationship between visible and invisible. For Wáng Fūzhī, influenced in that by Zhāng Zǎi's Confucianism more than Zhū Xī's,³⁴ there is no opposition between visible and invisible, but continuity. The universe is constituted by the *qì* (氣), the breath of energy, which sometimes disperses itself, letting things become invisible, and sometimes gathers itself, making things becoming visible. So there is no opposition between being and nothingness, but continuity between different kinds of "being" — although this word is inappropriate, since China neither developed any theory of "Being," nor even has an unique word for it. So this kind of transition is what Jullien calls "process," as opposed to the European concept of "creation," where something may appear *ex nihilo*. And Jullien contents himself to indicate a similar process for consciousness described by Wáng Fūzhī: some feelings may at first be very weak, then imperceptibly rise, and finally be prevailing. They do not magically appear, which would correspond to "creation," but gradually rise. And Jullien does not go further about this parallelism between both kinds of process: the cosmological one and the psychological one.

This "modesty"³⁵ is precisely what Billeter reproaches Jullien for. Jullien just shows the parallelism, without trying to justify it: he describes without explaining. Following Billeter, one can not be satisfied with a mere description. We want to understand, we want the truth. How is it that Wáng Fūzhī assimilates the cosmological and the psychological processes? How could we justify it? That is to say: how can we come to agree with it? No understanding without agreeing: this seems to be Billeter's principle of method.

To make Wáng Fūzhī's theory understandable and acceptable, Billeter develops a theory of projection.³⁶ This cosmologico-psychological process would first be a merely psychological one, which is then projected onto cosmology. This theory of projection leads Billeter to think that Wáng Fūzhī's thought is fundamentally a phenomenology. For instance, Wáng Fūzhī writes that the wise, to be effective, must expell all the thoughts while acting. Billeter does not explain it with Chinese commentaries, but with an example of common life: when trying to hold a stick upright in our hand, we must not focus on anything, but be aware of the whole activity. If we focus on the stick or on the hand, we will fail, the stick will fall on the ground.³⁷ This is characteristic of Billeter's method, explaining difficult texts with an

³⁴Jacques Gernet, *La Raison des choses. Essai sur la philosophie de Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692)*, NRF Bibliothèque de philosophie, Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

³⁵Billeter, "Comment lire Wang Fuzhi ?", p. 123.

³⁶It had also been exposed in Billeter, *L'Art chinois de l'écriture. Essai sur la calligraphie*, VI, pp. 145–153.

³⁷Billeter, "Comment lire Wang Fuzhi ?", pp. 114–115.

ordinary example. This allows Billeter to interpret Wáng Fūzhī's philosophy as a phenomenology of action.

As in Husserl's phenomenology, Wáng Fūzhī's describes the structures of consciousness. But there is a fundamental difference: whereas Husserl's phenomenology is reflexive, describing consciousness as consciousness, Wáng Fūzhī's is not.³⁸ He does not use, nor even know, the lexicon of consciousness. This phenomenology of action is thus encrypted: that is why projection plays a role. Having no phenomenological lexicon at his disposal, Wáng Fūzhī projected his phenomenology onto the external world. He projected onto the sky (天 *tiān*) the structures of effective consciousness he became aware of — although he probably was not aware of this projection itself. So, is there a real parallelism between consciousness and reality? Actually, what Wáng Fūzhī asserts about reality is an indirect way of describing phenomenological processes.

Some problem could nevertheless rise with this interpretation: it seems to invert what Wáng Fūzhī himself writes. He does not compare the reality with our consciousness, but conversely compares our consciousness with the cosmological process. Consciousness is for him a part of the world, and in this regard is secondary. There would be no projection from consciousness to reality, but, on the contrary, influence of the reality on our consciousness. To escape this objection, Billeter appeals to a “cybernetic loop.”³⁹ “Without being aware of that, the philosopher observes the projection of these activities [of common effective consciousness] in the working of the external world. And this is how the external world becomes for him a model of supreme activity, on which he judges that human beings are invited to model their own activity.”⁴⁰ There is a kind of round-trip, or feedback, between consciousness and reality. Natural consciousness credits the world with a sort of activity, and tries to imitate it, without being aware that this type of activity already, and first, belongs to itself.

A duality appears in Billeter's analysis, of which he is fully aware: subjectivity plays two roles. It is first an object, since Billeter describes Wáng Fūzhī's thought as a phenomenology, an inquiry about the structure of consciousness, from a subjective point of view. But it is also a method: “we are led to conceive Wáng Fūzhī's philosophy through a real phenomenology of activity and to interpret in return his philosophy starting from this phenomenology of activity.”⁴¹ Should we fear some *petitio principii*? It is indeed by no mean surprising to find as a result what has been presupposed at first. But Billeter does not fear this circularity; as well as he speaks about cybernetic loop, or feedback, one can see here some kind of hermeneutic circle. Far from being a mistake, this circularity is claimed for. Thus, adopting a

³⁸Ibid., pp. 111 and 119.

³⁹Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 120.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 115.

phenomenological point of view, Billeter's thought is throughout consistent.

What is the foundation of Billeter's method in the analysis of Wáng Fūzhī? Billeter makes no secret of it: we have to postulate the universality of human experience. Starting from the "possible universality of Wáng Fūzhī's philosophy, that is to say the possible adequation to definite universal data of the reality itself, or of the experience we have of it,"⁴² Billeter ends up in asserting that experience is "universal in its principles," and that "the elementary data of experience are [...] the ground on which [all philosophers] necessarily founded their systems."⁴³ So Billeter rigorously applies to Wáng Fūzhī's thought the methodological principles of his sinology.

We can for this occasion criticize this following simplistic way of presenting the controversy between Jullien and Billeter; a simplification which Billeter recently tended to feed.⁴⁴ It consists in presenting Jullien as a mere philosopher, Billeter as a mere sinologist. This opposition naturally hides a value judgement: Billeter would be a patient scientist, having no general theory about Chinese thought, whereas Jullien would be a philosopher, remaining in conceptual abstraction, looking from far away at Chinese texts and forcing their interpretation. The one would be longsighted, the other short-sighted. But both parts are false: Billeter's several times asserted admiration for Jullien may suffice to attest his competence as a sinologist. And contrary to what Jullien's often condescending posture towards Billeter may let us think,⁴⁵ Billeter is not less a philosopher. Although more discrete than Jullien, he also has his general theory of China; this theory, as we can expect, is much different from Jullien's. There is a "specifically Chinese propensity to project onto the world the forms of consciousness in motion rather than that of the motionless one."⁴⁶ Chinese thinkers, especially Neo-Confucianists,⁴⁷ but also philosophers like Zhuāngzǐ, are phenomenologists of activity. Whereas "most of Western philosophers sought beyond the sensible world a motionless reality, attempting to give an account of it by the mean of conceptual constructions," "the Chinese philosophers studied the motion and the transformations of experience."⁴⁸ Even more explicitly, Billeter concludes: "My thesis is that the phenomenology of activity I just gave an example of constitutes the rational kernel of the thought of many Chinese philosophers, therefore maybe one of the foundations of Chinese

⁴²Ibid., p. 109.

⁴³Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁴Jean François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*, Paris: Allia, 2006, p. 45; see also Jullien, *Chemin faisant. Connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie. Réplique à ****, V, pp. 43–44 and 49–51.

⁴⁵Jullien sometimes mentions a "weak thought," in particular in *ibid.*, ch. XII, pp. 131–141.

⁴⁶Billeter, "Comment lire Wang Fuzhi ?", p. 113.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 112.

thought in general.”⁴⁹ Billeter’s perspective on Chinese thought is thus not less ambitious than Jullien’s.

In this respect, how can be interpreted, in Billeter’s system, Jullien’s work? Not only “modesty,” but more than that, deeper than that: Jullien’s sinology is a too Western one. Understanding Chinese thought, following Billeter, implies trusting one’s experience, in order to meet up with Chinese philosophers on the ground they started from. Thus, interpreting Chinese thought in a conceptual way, as Jullien does, uproots it, and imports it into typical Western conceptual thinking. Jullien would therefore not have left the way of thinking he intended to distance himself from.

Billeter’s review of Jullien’s book is thus much more than a classical technical review: it is a sinological and philosophical manifesto. Billeter expresses his methodological principles, and does not only apply them to a particular Chinese thinker, Wáng Fūzhī: but he also applies them to sinology itself, through Jullien’s work. This reveals a highly systematic spirit, which exceeds mere sinology.

2.2 Conceptual environment of “projection”

Jullien’s answer is as systematic as Billeter’s critic was.⁵⁰ As the notion of projection was the heart of Billeter’s critic of *Procès ou création*, it will be Jullien’s main target. Faithful to his methodological bias, Jullien first refuses to use this concept, arguing that it can not be found anywhere in Wáng Fūzhī’s writings: “even though Chinese thinkers, and especially Wáng Fūzhī, conceived a definite mode of projection, between “feeling” and “landscape” (情 *qíng* and 景 *jǐng*, under the name of 寄託 *jìtuō*), it is obvious as well that, as it is used in Chinese aesthetics, it could not refer to the perspective, so familiar to us that it became natural, of the speaking subject.”⁵¹ Billeter blamed Jullien for interpreting Wáng Fūzhī in a Western way: Jullien turns the argument against Billeter. The most Western-styled interpretation is not the one using conceptualization, but the one using the notion of projection. To avoid intellectual ethnocentrism, we should content ourselves to say that the parallelism between cosmological and psychological processes is not due to any projection from consciousness onto the external world, but, literally following Wáng Fūzhī, that consciousness has to imitate the world’s kind of activity. Everything else would be overinterpretation.

The notion of projection actually conceals a system of concepts and postulates. First of all, projection, as a phenomenological and psychoanalytical

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 115. See also Billeter, *L’Art chinois de l’écriture. Essai sur la calligraphie*, VI, p. 153 and p. 154 n. 4.

⁵⁰François Jullien, “Lecture ou projection : Comment lire (autrement) Wang Fuzhi ?”, in: *Études chinoises* IX.2 (Sept. 1990), pp. 131–149.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 142.

concept, presupposes subjectivity.⁵² In other words, what in Billeter’s mind was a hermeneutic circle is now interpreted as a vicious circle. The notion of activity is also “signed” by Greek philosophy, and does not appear as such in Chinese tradition.⁵³ Thus, when using phenomenological notions as given data, “we do not compare *two* thoughts any more, but adapt the Chinese one to ours, we project this one onto that one. And Chinese thought is not any more perceived *starting from itself*.”⁵⁴ Jullien’s argument is fully symmetric with Billeter’s. Both sinologists blame one another for not leaving his own philosophical tradition, and for projecting onto Chinese thought his own way of thinking. More than that: as well as Billeter uses the phenomenological method to criticize Jullien’s abstract conceptual method, Jullien uses the structural method to criticize Billeter’s. No one of both sinologists can be blamed for inconsistency: they use the same method to analyze Chinese texts and to criticize other methods.

At this stage, the controversy can be considered as locked. There is, so to speak, nothing to add. Arguments have been expressed with so much symmetry that a state of equilibrium seems to have been reached. The controversy could only continue with details, or with human passions. Probably for this reason, it had been buried for long years, until Billeter published his book *Contre François Jullien* in 2006.

3 Power and subjectivity in China

3.1 Genealogy of an archeology

The new controversy that appeared in 2006 was once again initiated by Jean François Billeter and is still not closed, both sinologists criticizing one another, without having to spell things out, in their recent publications.⁵⁵

The book *Contre François Jullien* is a critic of the “myth of the alterity of China,”⁵⁶ which Jullien would have defended. The blame is both right and wrong: Jullien has always cared not to exaggerate the alterity, and to criticize the idea of a radical alterity between Chinese thought and European thought.⁵⁷ But for sure, Jullien generally pays more attention to differences than to similarities, considering for practical purposes that the main danger

⁵²Ibid., p. 142.

⁵³Ibid., p. 145.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁵See for example Jean François Billeter, “François Jullien, sur le fond”, in: *Monde chinois* 11 (Sept. 2007), pp. 67–74; and Jullien, *De l’Universel, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, pp. 8, 10, 257 and *passim*.

⁵⁶Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*, p. 9.

⁵⁷See for example François Jullien, *La Valeur allusive. Des catégories originales de l’interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise (Contribution à une réflexion sur l’altérité interculturelle)*, Quadrige, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003 (1985), Introduction.

is the temptation of assimilation more than the excess of distance.

What Billeter refuses is more than this myth: it is the very idea of a Chinese tradition. He does not contest that something exists like a Chinese tradition, but refuses the interpretation which is generally given of it, and Jullien would have relayed. In this respect, adopting a sociological point of view, Billeter links two aspects of his sinological work: the sociological method of his book about Lǐ Zhì, and the phenomenological method of his writings about Zhuāngzǐ or Wáng Fūzhī.

Billeter intends to expose the genealogy of this myth of alterity. This myth, which would have influenced Marcel Granet, Victor Segalen or Pierre Ryckmans, but also Voltaire, came from the Jesuits, who brought an ideology which would have been made up under the Hàn (漢) dynasty (202 BC).⁵⁸ At that time, Chinese mandarines would have “so much exploited the culture that they recreated it and made of it the ground of the new order.”⁵⁹ This myth would thus not only be a mere mistake, but a two millenia old plot. The goal of this lie was to make the empire look as if it was founded on nature: “to make people forget the violence and the arbitrary from which the empire was born, and with the help of which it remained, it had to appear as complying with the order of things. [...] It was the most effective way of guaranteeing the durability of the imperial government, of its hierarchies, of the forms of domination it imposed to people, of the submission they required. From this general recreation arose what Chinese people considered since then, and what is still considered, in China and elsewhere, as *Chinese civilization*.”⁶⁰ Highlighting the specificity of Chinese thought, Jullien would thus be nothing but one more victim of this millenary lie.

Following the young Chinese historian Lǐ Dōngjūn (李冬君),⁶¹ Billeter writes that even the authority of Confucius was artificially built, in order to submit the self, the subject, to the domination of the political system.⁶² The imperial Confucianism took root in this kind of political canonization. Lǐ Dōngjūn concludes that there would only be a real progress when the individual gets back to the first place.⁶³ We can see here the link with Billeter’s theory of subjectivity: subjectivity is universal, although it may be recovered or partly masked by oppression. Even when and where it seems to be absent, the only reason is that it has been repressed. Behind what Billeter analyzed earlier as a projection, there is a repression.

When Jullien studies Chinese thought as an intellectual tradition, he

⁵⁸Billeter, op. cit., pp. 9–19.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 18. See also Jean François Billeter, “Essai sur l’histoire chinoise, d’après Spinoza”, in: *Chine trois fois muette*, Paris: Allia, 2006, pp. 93–143; and Billeter, *L’Art chinois de l’écriture. Essai sur la calligraphie*, Postface, pp. 323–324, a text published in 2001, which already contains almost all arguments of the book *Contre François Jullien*.

⁶⁰Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*, pp. 18–19.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 25ff.

⁶²Ibid., p. 27.

⁶³Ibid., p. 30.

actually focuses on the very result of a political process: the “relative uniformity” of Chinese thought does not come from a community of ideal structures, but belongs to political history.⁶⁴ Even the classical book of *Zhōngyōng* (中庸), which Jullien translated and commented,⁶⁵ has a political meaning.⁶⁶ The whole thought of immanence that Jullien recognizes in Chinese thought is “linked to the imperial order.”⁶⁷

Nothing, in Jullien’s method, appears to be innocent. The insistence on concepts itself belongs to political means. The use of the abstract word of *dào* in the eclectic classical book *Huáinánzǐ* (淮南子) may thus conceal the real goal of this book, which is to “*found on nature* the imperial power.”⁶⁸ Going further than the earlier opposition between phenomenology and a kind of foucauldian archeology, Billeter intends to write the sociological *genealogy of an archeology*. Not only the ancestry of Jullien’s work is suspicious, but also its descendants: the idea of an alterity of Chinese thought has political consequences,⁶⁹ and, in particular, prevents the democratisation of China.⁷⁰

Going still further, Billeter applies his sociological principles to Jullien himself: the fascination of French intellectuals for what is called “Chinese civilization” may be related to the French system of university and *grandes écoles*, whose elitism resembles the Chinese mandarinat. However this argument may legitimately seem to be *ad hominem*, it has to be linked to the sociological method of Billeter, and reminds us the way Bourdieu criticized the tutorial system he came from. So this argument is not only *ad hominem*, it is a natural consequence of Billeter’s bias.

3.2 Archeology of a genealogy

In his answer, Jullien criticizes the very idea of an “imperial ideology,”⁷¹ inverting the relationship between political ideology and system of thought: power and lie would not have been enough to impose a way of thinking for such a long time and so much different eras. Even an ideology must be founded on a system of thought.⁷² So, behind genealogical arguments, archeological ones prevail.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁵Jullien, *Zhongyong. La Régulation à usage ordinaire*.

⁶⁶Billeter, op. cit., pp. 46–47.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 57.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 23ff.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 78–80.

⁷¹Jullien, *Chemin faisant. Connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie. Réplique à ****, XI, pp. 118ff.

⁷²Ibid., XI, p. 123. This may remind Foucault, defending archeology against sociology: “si l’existence à une groupe social peut toujours expliquer que tel ou tel ait choisi un système de pensée plutôt que l’autre, la condition pour que ce système ait été pensé ne réside jamais dans l’existence de ce groupe.” See Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, I, VI, VI, pp. 213–214.

Speaking of archeology, which Jullien does not, allows to highlight some foucauldian influence. Jullien denounces Billeter's thought as a "humanism," implicitly claiming for the inheritance of French "structuralism:" Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault and Althusser had little in common, but this little probably was the critic of what they called humanism. Foucault, in the last pages of *Les Mots et les choses*, asserted that the concept of man had just recently been invented in our culture, and may soon disappear; subjectivity would thus not be an universal concept, but an ephemeral one.⁷³ The very word of humanism, considered as a blame, is enough to see how far Jullien follows Foucault; but one more evidence is the expression of "soft humanism" (*humanisme mou*),⁷⁴ which appears in 1966 in a well-known interview with Foucault.⁷⁵ In Foucault's book *Les Mots et les choses*, phenomenology and sociology belong to the same humanist system of thought (*épistémè*).⁷⁶ Thus even Billeter's kind of genealogy is interpreted and criticized in an archeologic way.

Jullien also justifies his use of commentars to study Chinese classics. Without them, one can not even understand the texts, because of the ancient Chinese syntax;⁷⁷ this is the reason why, attacking Billeter's rearguard, Jullien doubts of the possibility to study Zhuāngzǐ without their help, without examining the relationship between this author and Lǎozǐ, Chinese sophists, Mohists, etc.⁷⁸ Using commentars avoids us to "blithely project our fantasy."⁷⁹

Defending his conceptual method, Jullien appeals for the "right to concept:"⁸⁰ "concept definitely is a instrument and abstraction is its result."⁸¹ When we are not aware of it, we may inadvertently project our concepts — such as reality, being, subjectivity, act — onto heterogenous conceptual universes.⁸²

Should we conclude of it that there is no universal experience, that we can not share anything with ancient Chinese thinkers? Absolutely not: the very existence of sinology shows that a community is possible, not only of experience, but the "community of the thinkable."⁸³ Thus Jullien and Billeter

⁷³Ibid., II, X, v–vi, pp. 397–398.

⁷⁴Jullien, op. cit., p. 15 and XII, pp. 131–141. See also Jullien, *De l'Universel, de l'uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, pp. 8 and 10.

⁷⁵Michel Foucault, "L'Homme est-il mort ?", in: *Dits et écrits II, 1954–1975*, Quarto, Paris: Gallimard, 2001 (1994), pp. 568–572, especially pp. 568–569.

⁷⁶About phenomenology, see Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, II, VII, vi, p. 261; II, IX, iv, pp. 331–332; II, IX, v, pp. 336–338. About sociology, see *ibid.*, II, X, iii, p. 367.

⁷⁷Jullien, *Chemin faisant. Connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie. Réplique à ****, VI, p. 56.

⁷⁸Ibid., VI, p. 57.

⁷⁹Ibid., VI, pp. 55–56.

⁸⁰Ibid., VII, pp. 58–69.

⁸¹Ibid., VII, p. 68.

⁸²Ibid., VIII, p. 76.

⁸³Ibid., X, p. 101.

both intend to form a community with ancient Chinese thinkers: but whereas Billeter founds it on experience and subjectivity, Jullien founds it on concept and discursive thought.

Conclusion

May we presuppose the universality of subjectivity and experience when studying ancient Chinese texts?

In philosophy of mathematics, at the beginning of the twentieth century, happened a controversy about the foundations of mathematics, which first seemed do be a merely technical one, but much later turned out to require a philosophical decision. Although arguments of both sinologists are taken from Chinese tradition, one can wonder whether such documents really may give any neutral answer, or whether the philosophical debate remains untouched.

That any discipline may give up a question and expect from philosophy an answer is generally a bad sign. When a discipline needs a philosophical decision to answer a technical question, the technical question may be considered as buried.

From a philosophical point of view, one can see that the structure of each thought is sufficient to make a decision impossible. Not only each of these sinological thoughts is very systematically structured, but both sinologists draw in an insightful way the conclusions implied by their theses. Not only each thought, but also the relationship between both thoughts seems to be systematic. So it is to fear that one can not answer the question of the implicit existence of experience and subjectivity in ancient Chinese thought without having already chosen.

We could maybe transpose into this controversy what Jules Vuillemin wrote about science and philosophy in general: “no scientific discovery is by itself able to force a philosophical decision.”⁸⁴

Final remarks

This text was sent to both sinologists, and Jean François Billeter graced the author with a detailed answer. Concerning the last point of the text, Mr. Billeter maintains that a thinking system may legitimately be condemned, not only for inconsistency, but also for its intellectual, moral or political consequences. This point of view was developed in his book *Contre François Jullien*.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Jules Vuillemin, *What Are Philosophical Systems?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (1986), IV, 3, p. 132.

⁸⁵Billeter, op. cit., pp. 7, 43 and 79–80.

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