François Jullien and the Hazards of "Chinese" Reality

by kaimarchal (Visit site for author's full name and information.) - Thursday, September 27, 2012


This week, the famous French sinologist François Jullien is in Taibei for a series of academic events (among others, he participates in a conference at National Central University, see http://ncu33013.blogspot.tw/2012/09/blog-post.html). It is no exaggeration to call Jullien the most famous sinologist in the West. His books have been enthusiastically received by the public, and he is probably the only living scholar writing on pre-modern Chinese thought who has made a visible impact on the field of philosophy – at least in France where philosophers like Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard have endorsed his very particular view of what philosophy should be. But also, to some extent, in Germany where, in 2010, he has received the prestigious Hannah-Arendt price for political thinking.

His work, Jullien emphasizes, does not aim to be comparative philosophy: being highly critical of the European tradition of philosophy (of what Heidegger has called the “onto-theological” foundations of Western thinking), Jullien turns to pre-modern China in order to gain distance from the current (Western) mode of thought and to raise the disturbing question whether “we” (in the so called West) are not entrapped in one particular world view that is ultimately wrong/doomed to failure/far too removed from ordinary life. Although it is not easy to summarize Jullien’s philosophical stance in a few lines, I think it is not wrong to describe him as a thinker belonging to the “Heideggerian” school, influenced by the romantic desire to over-come capitalist liberal modernity, even to restore some sense of meaning in a meaningless world (maybe searching for the final Versöhnung between subject and object, nature and history, East and West that Hegel was unable to discover).

Little surprise, then, that Jullien scorns the contemporary social and political reality in Asia as a bad copy of American capitalism, as some kind of Wiedergänger of the West, as un-real and simply “not interesting”. What Jullien yearns for is the cultural difference per se, the original Kluft between Greece and China; consequently, he has never had much sympathy for intellectuals like Mou Zongsan who have tried to somehow “modernize” the Confucian tradition by integrating Western elements.

This is, of course, still a rather sketchy description of Jullien’s project. Personally, I have much sympathy for his general approach to Chinese philosophy, being less systematic, less analytical than most other scholars’ work, but rather aphoristic, romantic, even “nomadic”. But there is no doubt that his books easily lead readers to develop a too strong notion of cultural otherness, thereby glorifying a long-gone literati culture and, rather naturally, developing a certain contempt for the Chinese present. Of course, his project is thought to be critical and even zetetic in a very general, even "Foucauldian" sense; but his basic Heideggerian stance (in continuation of the Kantian transcendental question) makes it that the ultimate goal of his books is not to get involved in contemporary Chinese reality, but to understand better the European heritage or re-discover European subjectivity or describe some sense of future meaningfulness that “we”, qua European citizens, can share and develop in our own lives (this hope becomes clear, I would argue, in his more recent book on the Zhuangzi ??, "Vital Nourishment:"
Departing from Happiness”, Zone Books 2007). However, all this, or at least this is what I would claim, means that there is one important blind spot in Jullien’s thought: he does not want to or is, due to some deeper features of his basic stance, unable to address social/political/economical reality as it presents itself today in the Chinese-speaking world. This also, I fear, puts him in a rather weak position to think through the on-going struggles in the Chinese world and probably also the future of a new, democratic China (Fabian Heubel, at the conference at National Central University already mentioned, has made a very similar point against Jullien).

What is reality? What is the reality of being modern? What is it to think in a contemporary fashion? These are of course very complicate questions, as anyone knows who has ever read Hegel. As I understand Jean François Billeter's criticism of Jullien (compare http://newleftreview.org/II/44/henry-zhao-contesting-confucius), it points exactly to this blind spot: the reality of politics in the PRC (are we allowed, following Peter Baehr's recent hint, to call post-Maoist China "post-totalitarian"? I am not sure - but to name it, like Daniel A. Bell has done, "Confucian" would certainly be the wrong move: compare Peter Baehr, "China the Anomaly. Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Maoist Regime"), European Journal of Political Theory, July 2010, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 267-286). How to describe this reality is, of course, an intricate question, but Jullien’s approach to China, I think, makes it in principle impossible to take seriously books like say Børge Bakken’s monograph The Exemplary Society : Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity (OUP 2000). In one word, his approach that regards Chinese reality under the logic of cultural difference, tends to devaluate more empirically-informed approaches.

But maybe this critique is still too crude. Let’s forget for a moment about Jullien. Another event has taken place these days in Taiwan that needs our attention: two days ago, the famous writer and current Taiwanese minister of cultural affairs, Lung Ying-tai ??? (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lung_Ying-tai), got challenged by a very brave, young politician from the opposition party, Tuan Yi-kang ??? (http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%AE%B5%E5%AE%9C%E5%BA%B7).

I think some of you may still never have seen a parliamentary debate in Chinese, so I add the link (http://media.ly.gov.tw/page.jsp?id=272529). It is actually quite a moving dialogue (because we witness real courage). To put it simply, Tuan Yi-kang is (1) highly skeptical about Lung’s commitment to human rights; (2) challenges her on the consistency of her liberal values that should not, in his opinion, become the object of a trade-off while dealing with China and Chinese culture; and (3) demands more transparence in her interaction with China.

Taiwan is, of course, the only democracy in the Chinese-speaking world (with many dark powers still working against it). Neither in China, nor in Hong Kong or Singapur are powerful ministers challenged in such a direct and open way like it happens here quite regularly. And, more generally speaking, it is not evident to me that this kind of dialogue can be easily described by the means of traditional Chinese vocabulary(say by using attributes like "Chinese" or "Confucian"). This kind of political or, to use Arendt's word, "agonal" contest is also what we should expect in a future open Chinese society. And the very real power-struggles that lie beneath this debate may even be one important undercurrent of “reality” inside contemporary China (and thus are only suppressed by the current regime). But than what to make of these insights, if they are real insights, for our project of re-thinking pre-modern Chinese
thought? And what to think about Jullien's presupposed Kluft between East and West? Or, more generally speaking, how shall we conceive of the relation between philosophical reflection and democracy in Asia? To put it more bluntly, can we still accept, like Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi did, the Confucian claim to authority, that is the normative belief that the Confucian-trained agent is not only legitimizd, but also capable of "guiding" modern, open societies?

Maybe we should start here, on the "ground zero" of Chinese democracy building, to re-think the logic of "cultural difference"...?!