

Re-Reading Zhang Taiyan against François Julien: Ontology and Political Critique in Chinese Thought'

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Abstract

This article challenges François Jullien's reading of Chinese thought based on his disjunction between ontology and *shi*, or propensity. According to Jullien, the Chinese history of ideas has been a never-changing entity in a homogeneous society for thousands of years. Julien's juxtaposing and contrasting 'European thought' and 'Chinese thought' falls into the trap of cultural essentialism he wanted to avoid. Jullien's interpretation of *shi* also led him to believe that Chinese people never challenge reality, never confront or resist, tend to stay in conformity, and lack interest in critical thinking. This paper argues that, despite the combination of Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism that constituted a powerful paradigm of normative governmentality of the hierarchical system in different dynasties in Chinese history, the spirit of political resistance has never ceased. Zhang Taiyan, at the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of Republican China, demonstrated the tradition of such critical political thinkers. The re-reading of Zhang Taiyan's Buddhist-inspired reading of Zhuangzi could offer us an additional possibility for the emancipatory and political thinking that can be inspirational even today.

Keywords

Buddhism, Confucianism, François Jullien, Legalism, ontology, Zhang Taiyan, Zhuangzi

Introduction

François Jullien is widely appreciated both by Chinese readers and Western sinologists (Chen, 2020; Escande, 2014; Heubel, 2008; Jiang, 2015; Lin, 2009; Liu, 2014, 2018; Wai, 2009; Xia, 2015; Yung, 2018). According to Jullien, over the past three thousand

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years, the Chinese culture has never been in contact with the West. The Chinese mode of thinking, therefore, is fundamentally different from the West and has offered us many valuable qualities to learn from. Following the tendency of the situation and the flow of energy, Chinese wisdom shows us a fluid way of living, a contrast to the insistence of ontology typical of European thought and from which we need to disengage. Jullien's interpretation of *shi*, the propensity of the situation, also led him to believe that the Chinese wisdom of living means that they never challenge reality, never confront or resist, tend to stay in conformity, and lack interest in critical thinking. Chinese artists and calligraphers pay more attention to the movement's potentiality in their artworks. Agreeing with the ancient philosopher Lao Zi that great image has no form, Jullien suggests that Chinese artists do not seek to portray the bodies or the objects. It is the reason why there are no nude bodies in the history of Chinese art while Western art has marvelled at the beauty of nudity since ancient times (Jullien, 2007, 2009).

Critics appreciate Jullien's criticism of European universality and a preference for Chinese culture's particularity (Escande, 2014). Inspired by Jullien's interpretation of Chinese philosophy, Chinese critics agree that Chinese culture is distinct from Western culture. Unlike the West, there has been no revolution in Chinese history (Xia, 215). Western art aims to represent the forms, while Chinese art tries to grasp the spirit. Chinese art has always been non-mimetic, characterized by fluidity and movement (Lin, 2009; Liu, 2018; Wai, 2009). Chinese scholars and Western sinologists also model themselves after Jullien's methodology, utilize the concept of *L'écart* to study contemporary Chinese poetry and poetics (Yung, 2018, 2020) and re-interpret Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi of the 12th century and his aesthetics (Chen, 2020). Scholars even plan to establish the Chinese school's aesthetic with new confidence (Liu, 2014).

To me, Jullien's interpretation of China exposes his fixation on China's image. He supposes that Chinese paintings do not deal with bodies and forms; there was no nudity in the history of Chinese paintings, he says, no mimetic practices in Chinese arts, and no revolutions in Chinese history. At some points, Jullien demonstrates an accurate analysis of the Chinese ruling regime's total governmentality by means of controlling the *shi*, manipulating and managing all dispositions of potentiality for all to follow willingly. As a whole, however he has missed the numerous acts of political resistance and diverse critical thoughts in Chinese history. Jullien's vision of China reflects a fragmented and isolated perception of Chinese culture and falls into the trap of cultural essentialism. The cultural essentialism exposed in Jullien's writings is not exceptional. We often see polarized interpretations of China: on the one hand, there is the romanticized and idealized vision of ancient Chinese culture that the West needs to learn from; on the other hand, the uglified and defamed image of Sino-phobic sentiments that take China as a threat. Jullien's version of the Chinese mode of thinking is just another exemplary case. Because his writings have appealed to many Western and Chinese readers, I have felt compelled to engage in this intervention.

This article challenges Jullien's reading of Chinese texts, particularly his interpretation of ontology and political resistance in the Chinese context. I argue that Jullien overlooks the historical contexts and the contemporary situation of the texts he interprets. Hence, he presents the impression that the Chinese history of ideas is a never-changing entity in a homogeneous and conformist society with docile and obedient

people for thousands of years. Julien's juxtaposing and contrasting 'European thought' and 'Chinese thought' offers a typical example of the very cultural essentialism he wanted to avoid. His interpretation of Chinese thought, shared by many European sinologists and thinkers, has reinforced the fixated image of China. I also challenge Jullien's interpretation of *shi* and show that his interpretive perspective is already framed in the European tradition. I suggest that the ontology-based tradition of critical and political thinking in Chinese originated in ancient times. One typical example is Zhuangzi (369 BCE–c.286 BCE) during the Warring States period of the 4th century BC. Other thinkers of the Warring States have also demonstrated their spirit of defiance and refutation. Zhang Taiyan (章太炎 1869–1936), a Chinese political and philosophical rebel, carried on this tradition and continued his political and philosophical writings for over 30 years when a new Chinese nation-state formed at the beginning of the 20th century. Between Zhuangzi and Zhang Taiyan exists a long and diverse history of scattered moments of resistance and critical thinking against the dominant regimes created by different ethnic power groups. This interpretation has comprised a different perception of ontology, through the route of internal criticism inspired by Zhuangzi and Buddhist thought, against the rites-based, familial, and hierarchical naming system in Confucianism mixed with Daoism and Legalism. This tradition of internal criticism exists in different historical moments among thinkers who attempted to reform the law and reject the concentration of power, land, and wealth. I call this tradition proto-socialist thinkers in the pre-modern Chinese context.

The question of ontology and *shi* is the core of the debate in François Jullien's works regarding his interpretation of the difference between the West and China and his concept of Chinese aesthetics. In the following sections, I shall first introduce Jullien's concept of *shi* and discuss the stakes in his juxtaposing 'European thought' and 'Chinese thought', and contrasting ontology to *shi*. I want to point out that Jullien's interpretation of the Chinese wisdom of observing the *shi* of the situation is pre-conditioned by his early experience in China from 1974 to 1975 when the nation-wide movement of the debate between Legalist theory and Confucianism took place. The elevation of the status of Legalism against Confucianism in this historical moment reinforced his impression of the conformist and compliant mentality he believes to be shared by all Chinese people. I shall then focus on the paradoxical nodal point of the void and *écart* discussed by Jullien, which unwittingly followed Western economic theology's logic and influenced his interpretation of the concept of *shi*. In the second part of my essay, I'll turn to the Chinese thinker Zhang Taiyan. I suggest that the political articles Zhang Taiyan wrote over 30 years through the transformative stage from the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republican era demonstrate an alternative perspective of ontology and rigorous political philosophy that critiques the nominal system of the existing ruling regime. His re-reading of Zhuangzi articulates the fundamental equality of all beings, a hypothesis that motivates all political interventions. I also want to show that, culminating in and manifested through Zhang Taiyan, a long tradition of political resistance and philosophical writings have emerged in various historical contexts. Zhang Taiyan's reflections and critiques when a new modern nation-state was taking shape in the last century are worth our re-assessment. I argue that this re-reading of Zhang Taiyan could offer an additional possibility for the emancipatory intervention and political thinking that can be inspirational even today.

François Jullien's Concept of *Shi* (Propensity)

I'll begin with Jullien's (2019) book *From Being to Living: A Euro-Chinese Lexicon of Thought*, which in a way sums up his methodology and argument in general. Jullien suggests that, through the distance (*écart*) opened between Chinese and European 'language-thought', we encounter the tension and novelty in our thinking and 'reconfigure the field of what is thinkable' (Jullien, 2019: xi). Jullien argues that the modes of thinking between Europe and China are fundamentally different. To leave Europe 'with its ancient parapeps', he advises us to go through the confrontation step by step, moving from one concept to the next, as in a journey, 'to form a lexicon progressively' (Jullien, 2019: x). The notion of *shi* 勢 (propensity) suggests the potential of the situation. It is the first on the list, as opposed to the European idea of causality. This concept also prepares Jullien to challenge Being or ontology, which he considers the foundation of European thoughts. From this ground of ontology comes the subject's notion of freedom of choice, intention, calculation, projection, arrangement, decision, position, etc. Jullien writes, 'the logic of Meaning is what we know best as the founding relationship of ontology. It begins with the dualist mutual exclusion of contraries, between "being" and "non-being," or "truth" and opinion', a path that Chinese thought does not follow (Jullien, 2019: 57). Through a long elaboration about the contrast between European thought and Chinese thought, Jullien proposes to seek a way to move out of the European model of ontology and move toward the Chinese view of life or living (*vivre*). For him, it means to deconstruct and disengage from ontology (Jullien, 2019: 203).

The Chinese mode of thinking, Jullien believes, is not bounded by the constraints of ontology, and thus not bounded by the limitation of subject-object binary opposition. Instead, Chinese thought takes place in life (*vivre*). Chinese thinkers do not ask what things 'are' but how they lean, incline, or inflect: what are the propensities of the situation? Right decision or the freedom of choice is not the crucial issue. It suffices if one knows how to detect a "priming" (*ji* 幾) of transformation in each thread or fiber of the situation' (Jullien, 2019: 4). Jullien stresses that it is not up to the subject 'who has conceived and willed the situation, who has constructed a plan and then implemented it' (p. 9). The situation will evolve according to its intrinsic propensity and the situation's potential (*shi* 勢) and the 'flow of energy' (*qi* 氣) (Jullien, 2019: 11). One has to focus on receptivity instead of action. 'For this taking hold by letting go is no longer oriented; it no longer projects. Without a looming shadow, it is no longer driven by intentionality and consequently holds everything in equality. Its harnessing is wide open because it doesn't expect to harness anything' (Jullien, 2019: 14). Receptivity allows for an 'openness' by erasing any opposition, position, direction, and decision. Likewise, it entails evasiveness, elusiveness and indeterminability, which are also essential (Jullien, 2019: 92–5).

Jullien's elaborations on the concept of *shi*, the propensity of situation, have opened up a new terrain of thought that other scholars have not treated in depth. His selection of Chinese notions and vocabularies has indeed highlighted features in Chinese thought worth further investigation. His juxtaposition and contrasting of 'European thought' and 'Chinese thought', I shall point out, fall into the trap of essentialism and have its consequences.

European Culture vs. Chinese Culture?

Contrary to Jullien's thesis of Chinese thought vs. European thought, I argue, there is no 'pure' local culture or uncontaminated intellectual tradition in any society. The spatialization of knowledge, such as area studies, national literature, or national history, as many thinkers have pointed out, is a misleading way of thinking that assumes the centrality of space in the constitution of social orders (Harootunian, 2005, 2010; Sakai, 1989). The motivation to delineate a foreign culture, to comprehend a different 'culture', often presupposes the comparability of cultural differences. This comparison, in whatever form, follows the logic grounded on the same measurement and a pre-given perspectival grid (Harootunian, 2005, 2010; Sakai, 1989). Paradoxically, to resist the Euro-centric interpretation of global modernity, the 'alternative modernities' developed in Third World countries resorted to their own traditional cultures or to a particular time in their earlier history (Harootunian, 2005: 35–7, 50).

Through a detour via Chinese philosophy, Jullien's attempt to challenge the Euro-centric tradition follows the same logic of spatialization and reification of culture. It is also an act of hypostatization and even fetishization of geographical space. Histories are always long processes of syncretism and acculturation. The assumption of a homogeneous and uncontaminated civilization ignores the reality of simultaneously intertwining and interacting cultures through the historical process. This perspective also disavows the co-existence of different temporalities in the same place that they co-originate and co-constitute the local cultural and social orders.

As we look back in history, we know that the travel and communication of culture brought by trade and war has triggered the mutations and transformations of thought throughout Chinese history. There were traces of early Zoroastrianism in China as early as the Han dynasty, around 206 BC to 200 AD. Early Christianity also was preached in China in the 6th century. Shortly after the death of Muhammad, Islamic culture and religion entered China around 651 AD. We cannot say that the Chinese share one homogeneous culture because each dynasty's turnover involved the rotation of power by different ethnic tribes from the north and the west. During the period of the 'Five Barbarians and 16 Kingdoms' (317–581AD), for example, short-lived sovereign states formed mainly by ethnic tribes of the northern borders, such as Xiongnu, Xianbei, Di, Jie, Qiang, and Dingling, fought one another. The most prominent examples are the Yuan Dynasty established by the Mongolian Borjigin clan and the Manchu Aisin Gioro clan's Qing Dynasty. Both dynasties introduced diverse ethnic groups and cultures.

When we re-consider the intellectual debates in the different historical periods, we also know that there were various definable or undefinable 'schools' of thought. Daoism and Confucianism are merely two names used to describe the scholars retrospectively. These labels, however, do not necessarily fit those scholars' categorization. As early as the time of Confucius and Zhuangzi, from around the 6th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE, in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States, there were mixed schools of syncretism, embodying various diverse thought traces. Every re-interpretation of the Confucian classics and Daoist texts in later time is an intellectual endeavour of hermeneutics. It bears the historical imprints and transcultural processes due to their contemporaries' different political and contextual conditions.

Consequently, we need to question the assumption of any pure and authentic Chinese thought. There are many instances of syncretism with as diverse cultural systems as the Turkish, Mongolian, Tibetan, Manchurian, Islamic, Arabic, and other cultures from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East that Chinese history has witnessed in the long historical process. Ho Ping-ti (何炳棣 1917–2012) pointed out that many famous authors and artists in Chinese history have their origins from the eastern part of the Eurasian Steppe or Central Asia. The renowned poet Li Bai (李白 701–762) had his background in Kirghizia, Bai Juyi (白居易 772–846) was from Central Asia and Liu Yuxi (劉禹錫 772–842) was from Xianbei (鮮卑), one of the ancient nomadic tribes on the northern borders of China. The great architect Yu Wenkai (宇文愷 555–612) was born from a mixed origin of Xianbei and Xiongnu (匈奴). Another famous architect, He Chou (何稠 c. 6th century), and the painter Mi Fei (米芾 1051–1107) were both descendants from Sogdiana, an ancient Iranian civilization (Ho, 1998). Intellectuals of different historical moments appropriated foreign concepts from another culture to respond to their time's questions and demands. Using traditional Chinese phraseology, or newly coined Chinese words, and adapting or altering the translated texts they consulted, these phrases were inscribed and overlaid with cross-references. This process of semiotic-discursive syncretism normalized the concept through Chinese phraseology. Typical examples are terms such as *zhong* 忠, *xiao* 孝, *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *kong* 空, *wu* 無, *xin* 心, or *tianxia* 天下. The meaning of these phrases changed according to the contexts and backgrounds of the political situation. The highly invested shifting terms signify both the assumed content and the act of enunciation of the subject and expose the contextual background of the enunciation. It would be erroneous to assume that these thinkers, scholars and artists share the same tradition or culture, even though they adopt the Chinese scripts.

The Historical Moment when François Jullien Encountered China and the Notion of *Shi*

Jullien's interpretation of *shi* and his conviction that Chinese people know the wisdom not to confront and critique was formed through his experience in China during 1974–5, at the peak of the political movement of Examining Legalist Theories and Censuring Confucianism (*Pinfa piru* 評法批儒). Besides Lu Xun and Mao Zedong, the only Chinese classics he could encounter were the Legalists' works. Jullien emphasized that Legalism was not the 'law' but the 'norm'. Through the collections in the embassy, Jullien read Jean Pasqualini's *Prisoner of Mao*, which inevitably shocked him. In the book, Pasqualini describes the Chinese authority's invention of 'Reform through Labour' (*Lao Dong Gai Zao*, or *Lao Gai* in short).

What the Russians never understood, and what the Chinese Communists knew all along, is that convict labor can never be productive or profitable if it is extracted only by coercion or torture. The Chinese were the first to grasp the art of motivating prisoners. That's what *Lao Gai* is all about. (Pasqualini and Chelminski, 1976: 10)

Jullien comments, 'What is involved here, besides the art of motivation, is what Chinese thought clearly states, and runs parallel with manipulation of thought: the decisive functions of conditions of mediations.' He also suggests that this is the question of 'subject/situation': 'Situation functions as the "pre-condition", [and] immediately

follows as “system” to “function” (Jullien and Marchaisse, 2005: 64–5). During the Cultural Revolution, people lived a uniform life in People’s Communes, in the context of Maoist-dominated thought, broadcast through loudspeakers repeating ‘Quotations from Chairman Mao’. The subject changes according to the situation, and the whole process is an ‘operation system’. Under this operation system, Jullien observes, one does not need to consider inner struggles such as belief, betrayal, honesty, and deception, but only act according to the situation. There were submissions to the situation, such as self-manipulation, self-critique, self-transformation, but no oppositional confrontation. People were happily silenced during and through labour. They believed Mao’s tenets wholeheartedly and thus absolutely legitimized manipulation. Jullien seemed to be puzzled about these phenomena and started to think about ‘the world where thoughts are not diversified’ and instead began to gradually explore hidden propensity, manipulation, and efficacy (Jullien and Marchaisse, 2005: 59–69, 73–82).

Jullien explores the concept of *shi* (勢) extensively in *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China* (Jullien, 1995 [1992]). He suggests that *shi* is situated between static disposition and dynamic propensity and can be explained in terms of position, circumstances, power and potential (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 11–12). Reading from the perspective of efficacy, Jullien argues that both the Confucian thought of moral transformation and the Legalist thought of distribution of ‘propensity’ are strategies of manipulation, allocation and social order management that lead to governance via immanence. Han Fei (韓非), in the 3rd century BCE, proposed his theory concerning the ruler keeping tight hold of power (聖人執要) and the position of *huanzhong* (環中) (central nodal point) in a monarch’s position of strength (*shi wei* 勢位). Jullien interprets this theory as follows: when everyone performs their duty, accordingly, the governance apparatus will operate automatically and all the different directions of the world will contribute to and serve it. What concerns Jullien is how the preparation of propensity develops into the finished form: if the development aligns with the hidden tendency, obtains the potential and draws on the propensity, the efficacy will take place naturally. In Jullien’s narrative, the governance logic from pre-Qin theorists Han Fei and Guiguzi, to the centralized Qin Dynasty, to the political movement of Examining Legalist Theories and Censuring Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution in socialist China follow an unbroken chain. Such historical narratives dominated Jullien’s works and were internalized as ‘Europe’s other’ (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 19).

Through *shi*, Jullien claims that he can uncover ‘the coherence that underlies the Chinese mode of thought’ and rediscover ‘the logical if underlining features of an entire culture’ (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 18–19). Jullien believes that *shi* played essential roles in various fields, including the force of form in calligraphy, the tension in the configuration in painting and the style of literary composition. However, the concept of *shi* is also most apparent and effectively applied in the classical Chinese art of war. In military strategy, a good warrior needs to recognize all the factors favourable to him early enough, before engaging in battle, to avoid confrontation. In politics, manipulation of the situation involves the estimation of power relations to determine whether one should exploit his position or passively act according to the circumstances. For the Legalists, the state is ‘a complete and sufficient mechanism’. The sovereign occupies his position fully to control and manipulate his subjects (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 45). For Jullien, through the Chinese

model of governance, 'enforced submission was transformed into voluntary cooperation and tyranny was disguised by the fine trappings of consensus' (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 68). As tendencies were predicted, Chinese people would not confront or resist. They would not claim rights, freedom and liberty. Jullien argues that such a logic of manipulation presupposes one could control others' minds. Besides, due to the distrust of words, the philosophy of manipulation also implied 'the rejection of all persuasion'. Thus, accordingly, deliberation, as in Greek democracy, did not emerge in Chinese civilization (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 66–9).

Although Jullien acknowledges a space of tension and some degree of openness, he still emphasizes: 'on a large scale, an ineluctable regulatory process is in operation'. Accordingly, a wise sage can understand the regulatory logic and circumstances as well as perceive any future development (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 203). Every level of reality is necessarily the result of various forces' interaction, which creates the tendency. Through alternation and variation, reality continues to come about. Yet, to Jullien, this is a closed system. Chinese thought is necessarily part and parcel of this system. It does not test reality. It does not need a myth. Instead, Chinese thought yields rites and uses signs that embody the operation of the situation's internal tendency. Under the concept of *shi*, Chinese thoughts emphasize adaption to nature and circumstances rather than to an after-life. Chinese wisdom and strategy perceive the tendency's internal necessity and spontaneity, avoid questioning and confronting reality, and adapt to the circumstances. Once he understands any rivalry is inter-related, there is no need to confront. Thus, Chinese culture does not create a tragic hero like Prometheus (Jullien, 1995 [1992]: 265).

In *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking* (2004), Jullien continues to develop the concept of *shi*. He explores the notion of efficacy in the works of Chinese realists such as Laozi (老子), Sunzi (孫子), Han Feizi (韓非子) and Guiguzi (鬼谷子). To Jullien, the idea of 'immanence' was shared by different schools of thought, from moralists to realists. In contrast to the Western model of thinking, which starts with an ideal model, Chinese thought focuses on the course of things. It allows itself to be carried along by this propensity and relies on the potential inherent in the situation. The pairing of *xing-shi* (形勢) in ancient China, meaning 'configuration', or *xing* (形) and 'potential' or *shi* (勢) respectively, or as configuration-potential and even 'form-potential', has already implied a tendency and that effects will naturally take place through the situation (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 17). Jullien reminds us that in Sunzi's *Art of War* there is no single fixed rule (*fa* 法) for winning a war but that it is necessary to vary and evolve according to circumstances. The military strategy elaborated by Sunzi teaches us that the potential of the situation is whatever profits from that which is variable. One only needs to allow oneself to be carried along in the situation, to enter the logic of its evolution (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 20–24).

For Jullien, the act of 'doing nothing, with nothing left undone' (*wu wei wu bu wei* 無為無不為) and the logic of 'everyone coming, from all four corners of the world, to offer him support' (*si fang lai xiao* 四方來效) connote techniques of total manipulation and governmentality. These techniques set up the circumstances from the very beginning to flow naturally and spontaneously and establish the foundation of a totalitarian regime. Chinese Legalists inherited 'political authoritarianism' from Taoism. Legalist governmentality was even internalized in the Confucian system in the Han

Dynasty. In the Legalist establishment of authoritarian institutions, the original transcendence was ‘converted into pure immanence’ (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 97, 99).

Jullien suggest that power, as analysed by the Chinese Legalists, does not rely on showing itself: the one in control only needs to remain ‘empty, take no action’ (‘void and without action’) to ‘allow the power to operate’. Every individual ‘reacts instinctively out of fear and self-interest’ and meticulous procedures ‘establish collective responsibility, mutual hostility, and interdependence’ so that the ruler can maintain control over the entire population (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 99–100). Jullien writes:

the ruler no longer needs to bother to pass judgments. Punishments and rewards are automatic. Nor need he bother to maintain surveillance, since denunciations also become automatic. Eventually, once this regime has been perfectly assimilated, even punishments are no longer necessary, since every individual, intensely motivated by desire and repulsion, spontaneously observes the imposed law. (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 100)

Under the pure mechanism, ‘Once set in motion, the wheels turn automatically’ (p. 100).

In Jullien’s discussion of *shi*, he speaks of ‘apparatus’, ‘regime’ and ‘disposition’. The apparatus operates automatically, as pure immanence, without allowing any spaces for resistance. On the one hand, Jullien has already demonstrated his sharp critique of the authoritarian total governmentality, which I fully agree with, especially viewing China’s current regime. On the other hand, in emphasizing the ‘uniformity’ of Chinese culture, he betrays his missed encounter with the Chinese culture he claimed to have comprehended. Although he intends to seek a source of thought that differs from Europe, he uses concepts shared by contemporary European philosophers. In particular, Jullien’s interpretation of ‘void’ (*vide*) in this context views efficacy from the perspective of economic disposition that is very close to Agamben’s analysis of the economic theology in the Western tradition (Agamben, 2011; Liu, 2015). In his interpretation of the ‘void’, I think he bypassed the possibility of critical thinking and political resistance that Chinese thinkers would practise. I will elaborate on this point in the following section.

The Écart in Jullien’s Interpretation of the Void: The Logic of Western Economic Theology

Jullien’s description of the military strategies of Sunzi and Guiguizi are closely related to Mao Zedong’s thoughts on the military. Mao’s works were translated into French in the 1960s and widely circulated among Francophone intellectuals. Jullien was no exception. Mao was no doubt familiar with Sunzi and Guiguizi. His military theories on guerrilla warfare in 1935 and protracted wars in 1938 showcase a series of military tactics. These strategies include gaining control by striking late, luring the enemy in deep, advancing wave upon wave, retreating once attacked, breaking up the whole into parts, and repositioning without a fixed route. Other strategies involve a prolonged process with quick, decisive battles, awareness of the relationship between internal and external wars, adopting a comprehensive viewpoint, and considering all the situations during an unbalanced standoff. Mao also opposes positional warfare and attrition warfare.

In his conversations with Marchaisse, Jullien suggests that Mao is the heir of Sunzi. During the 'Long March', Mao created favourable circumstances for himself by making circling retreats. Mao did not present himself as an epic hero. He did not confront the situation directly. Instead, he retreated, avoided confrontation, waited with patience but eventually exploited the potential of a situation to maintain control over the whole picture. Jullien comments that Deng Xiaoping also successfully employed a similar strategy with Mao (Jullien and Marchaisse, 2005: 342, 346). Jullien seems intrigued and fascinated by Mao's flexible tactics. He points out that Legalism, which in many respects was a despotism, 'enslaves the entire mass of individuals to the power of a single figure who embodies the State'. A Chinese totalitarian leader is concerned with how to 'acquire more power than any of the rival kingdoms to reunite China under his sole rule'. He 'organize[s] power in a completely artificial fashion' and wishes this artificial apparatus 'to operate on its own' so as to ensure that social order and obedience operates spontaneously. In this 'apparatus' combining immanence and efficacy, the operation of power becomes invisible (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 101–2). In Jullien's analysis, a tyrant can direct everything without any effort or personal involvement. Rigid laws create absolute power, allowing a ruler to not do anything, give any command or seek any authority. Once the ruler has established the regime, the apparatus of power makes others spontaneously serve the ruler with all their capacities. Thus, a political theory of manipulation is much more advanced than a Machiavellian one (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 157)

To me, the main problem of Jullien's construction of Chinese critical thinking is in his fixated interpretation of the 'void' that leads him to the conviction that the Chinese techniques of total manipulation and governmentality contribute to absolute obedience and compliance. Jullien takes the 'void' as the central nodal point of the 'core of the apparatus', suggesting that the seat of the sage is the 'void'. Through a Daoist inflection of Legalism, Jullien explains that it is less a governance 'with visible effects' than power 'with an invisible upstream'. Efficacy in Chinese thought, for Jullien, emphasizes not the production side but the final 'effects'. It is a logic of accomplishment and is an effect of this void. It is both 'holding' and 'elaborating': 'as it were empty, so it is never exhausted by being used' (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 109). The continuous and oncoming 'manipulation' leads to effects that are 'effective without any action', 'understandable without seeing' and that 'come without calling' (*Laozi*, Section 73). It implies an internalized calling and a world spontaneously offering its supports and revealing a strategy of manipulation from the initial stage. Here the people follow automatically rather than resist. The position of the 'sage' overlaps with the core of the 'apparatus'. In this sense, it is total governance from immanence.

In Jullien's interpretation, I find a logic of European economic theology. Jullien uses the concept of 'emptiness' (*wu* 無) to illustrate that the position of a ruler, as argued in Agamben's (2011) *The Kingdom and the Glory*, which needs to 'be vacated', as that of providence (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 29–30). Jullien uses Laozi's concept and argues that real efficacy seems to be hollow and that 'the perfect capacity resembles a valley': 'Full capacity is, as it were, insufficient'. Laozi's emptiness is not an 'emptiness of inexistence'. For Laozi, emptiness or void (*kong* 空) is a condition of continuous rotation and operates in co-relationship with fullness (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 109–10). The 'apparatus of the status', i.e. the throne, plays a crucial role. The 'sage' is the ruler whose position

of strength is with absolute efficacy. The status of authority and the art of rule depends on setting into play tendencies ‘implicated and internalized’ and ‘making others come to my position’ (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 27) The ‘empty’ core of the sage/apparatus affects the movement of the whole situation and makes it finish the entire process automatically: ‘Once a process has begun, its impetus carries it onward; something that has started seeks only to “become”’ (Jullien, 2004 [1997]: 89–90). If a ruler allows this process to take place, it will have the desired effects automatically, and the people will spontaneously come to him.

Jullien’s discussion of the Chinese concepts of *shi* (propensity) and *kong* (void) resonates with Agamben’s idea of the European theological economic. In Jullien’s elaborations on the mythical and manipulative nature of the void/emptiness, he echoes, albeit unintentionally, Agamben’s analysis of the internalized logic of political governance. Jullien suggests that the Chinese accept the inevitability of *shi* and only act according to propensity. So-called ‘heaven’ is the totalizing and absolutization of immanence. In this reasoning, Jullien explains how people, accepting the tendency of *shi*, do not react or resist critically against the situation but fulfil a call and submission mechanism. Jullien thus rules out any possibility of critique.

The internal *écarts* and paradoxes in Jullien’s thinking are caused by this blindness to the dynamic of the void in an individual thinker’s decision-making process. Jullien points to Taoist and Legalist governmentality as inherent in the Confucian system. Accordingly, submissiveness and adaptation to the situation (propensity) are at the heart of an absence of both critiques and the tragic hero. Chinese people hardly challenge reality, never confront or resist, and lack interest in critical thinking. At stake is only the propensity of the broader context in a closed system. It leads to the question: Is this position of the void a self-operating apparatus? Is there implicitly a mythical position of strength inhabited by a sovereign’s desire? Is it indeed a sort of Sage-King as an invisible Subject, managing the potentiality of all the vectors of the situation? Is there no accidental encounter that can alter the course of the process? Can each person seize the ‘empty place’ and make their own judgement and decision? Can they divert the direction of the potentiality of the situation?

Political Ontology and Critical Thinking in Chinese Thought: Zhang Taiyan and the Chinese Critical Tradition

Even though Jullien’s analysis of total manipulation and absolute governmentality is persuasive, his vision leaves no room for unpredictable happenings. He ignores the fact that, in Chinese history, there have been 300 to 400 insurrections in each dynasty because of oppressive rules with uneven distribution of lands, heavy taxation and ethnic hierarchical governance. In each dynasty, the death toll caused by internal insurrections or dynastic changes could reach 3 million to 80 million people (Jian, 2008 [1951]). Also, he has missed the encounter with ontology and the political critique understood by Chinese thinkers. Contrary to Jullien’s understanding, in China, since ancient time, there have been discussions of the substance, nature, essence of things, ontology (*benti* 本體), authentic self and thus-ness (*bhūta-tathatā* 真如), such as the thought of Zhuangzi (c.369 BCE–c.286 BCE).

Critical thinkers and political reformers in Chinese history abound as early as the Spring and Autumn period (770–403 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), including Guan Zhong (管仲 c.725–645 BCE), Li Kui (李悝 455–395 BCE), Shang Yang (商鞅 390–338 BCE), Li Si (李斯 284–208 BCE), Fan Sui (范雎 ?–255 BCE), and so on. Such tradition continues through the later dynasties, such as Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元 773–819 AD), Wang Anshi (王安石 1021–1086 AD), etc. Zhang Taiyan continues this tradition when a new Chinese nation-state forms at the beginning of the 20th century. Between the ancient philosophers and Zhang Taiyan exists a long and diverse history of scattered moments of resistance and critical thinking against the dominant regimes created by different ethnic power groups.

To make my point concise, I want to concentrate on Zhang Taiyan's elaboration of ontology, the foundation of his critical philosophy. I will discuss his re-reading of Zhuangzi (莊子) in *Commentary on the Discussion on Equality of Things* (*Qiwulun Shi* 齊物論釋) and other essays he wrote at the turn of regime change with the following six theses. (For a more comprehensive discussion see Liu, 2020.)

Thesis 1: Ontology is the Site for All Encounters of Shi and All Seeds for Future Happenings

Zhang Taiyan interprets the substance of being (*benti* 本體) through the concept of *xin* (心, 'heart'/'mind'). Zhang views ontology as 'inexhaustible interdependent origination and arising' (*wujing yuanqi* 無盡緣起). He illustrates this concept through his rereading of Zhuangzi, as well as the Buddhist canons *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Huayan Jing 華嚴經) and *Vijñāptimātratāsiddhi* (Wei Shi Lun 唯識論). To Zhang, 'living' or life (*huo* 活) is the equivalence of Zhuangzi's 'act' (*xing* 行) or the Buddhist notion of 'movement' (*dong* 動), with which the living constantly arise and encounter beings. 'Everything is a seed': everything depends on, affects and becomes the seeds and potential, *shi*, of each other's future developments, but in different forms.

Zhang draws on the Buddhist concepts of *cang* (藏 store, hide) and *zhi* (執 seize, grab), an ontology through the idea of *xinti* 心體, the substance of heart/mind, the ontology of being. Within the process of the constant movement of the heart/mind (*xin*), a being seizes and stores the experiences impressed on him through various encounters. These stored impressions give rise to ideas and images and, further, to opinions and thoughts. Such an ontology, whose elements are inter-dependent, is not fixed but continuously in movement and mutation. The encounters with others become seeds of each other at every moment.

It is the eighth level of storehouse consciousness (第八識), known as *ālaya-vijñāna* or *ādāna-vijñāna*, also as thus-ness (真如), meaning to hide and store (*cang* 藏) or to hold (*chi* 持) simultaneously. In *Commentary on the Discussion on Equality of Things*, Zhang explains that the eighth consciousness uses the body to receive and hide impressions, as the consciousness of all seeds. In other words, the eighth consciousness is the 'heart' nurtured by all emotions and feelings received by the body. These impressions and images are so tiny and imperceptible that 'one does not know what he/she holds' (不知其所持者). One does not know the distinction between the true self and fixated attachment

(deep-rooted delusion). However, every knowing and seeing initiates from the heart/mind, a fragmented, subjective position, and does not stop developing into something remote and alienated from oneself.

For Zhang, Zhuangzi's proposition to 'allow one to be/act as oneself' (使其自己) in *Qiwulun* implies not to be carried away by false fixations and to return continually to one's true being. The returning to one's true being, *benti* 本體, or *bhūta-tathatā* 真如, however, is not an easy task. As Zhang points out, the dialectic process of consciousness (*vijñāna* 識) splits into two aspects from the very beginning, namely that of appearance (*xiang* 相) and sight (*jian* 見). Appearance and sight cling to each other and do not separate. As soon as consciousness is attached to a name, the path that it follows is fixed. The ontology of inexhaustible and interdependent origination, however, is inevitably confined by the nominal system. Following these strands of thought, Zhang develops his political critique of the episteme and the nominal system.

Thesis 2: Critique of the Episteme and the Nominal System

Zhang Taiyan is rigorous in his critique of the nominal system and episteme established by Confucian ideology and bureaucratic system. In *Discussion on Equality of Things* (*Qiwulun*), Zhuangzi sharply pointed out the naming system's beguilement. Following Zhuangzi, but in a different trajectory, Zhang argues that, according to the *Vijñānavāda* School (唯識學), touching, feeling, perception, volition and attention are the five mental activities. One's judgement develops from 'touching' and 'feeling', based on the subjective position. The processes of these mental activities replace each other. They are substituted by different names, as a consequence of which one obeys the rules defined by the nominal system without understanding how judgement initially takes place.

For Zhang, the ontology (*xin*) is the site of all the seeds originating from all encounters. The restriction of the nominal system also starts from primary subjective positions. It would then be crucial to question and critique the dominant nominal system. Furthermore, everyone assumes that their opinion is the truth or the consensus that everyone shares and should follow. Zhang uses the temporal moment (分 *fen*) to explain the diversity of personal feelings and subjective positions. Everyone has their temporality (各有時分), situated at different times, different situations, in various processes, and everyone has their emotional feelings. When people claim that their 'temporal moment' is a standard measurement, it is already an arbitrary manipulation. If one uses subjective judgement as a general rule, one is arbitrarily taking their judgement as a universal truth.

Thesis 3: Critique of Linear Perspective of History and the Consistency of Norms

Zhang's understanding of emptiness and movement fundamentally cancels any assumption that history is a linear development from any one origin but instead is a continuous evolution with contingency, interacting with various encounters. A continuously operating mind keeps dissolving the materialistic fixations caused by the subjective position through the movement of negation, *wu* (無 to empty), and making space, *kong* (空 void),

that allows all the arisings and happenings to take place. As everything interacts with each other and becomes each other's seed for transformation, it also implies all the results rely on emptying the site of *xin* and making space for and giving birth to new arising. It is the reason why Zhang insisted that there was no eternal principle (*Tao* 道, law or path) because the rules varied according to the changes of time. Zhang further argues that the judgement in historical texts is different from later generations. If someone judges the past with a later norm and convention, or vice versa, they do not understand that what is recorded in history is what happened only in the past, and it takes shape differently in a different time.

Zhang's critique of subjective perceptions and conventional norms lets us understand the foundation of his critical view of history and his distrust of canonical models of historical texts, and the dictates of ancient kings. For him, there is no fixed norm for different generations (文之轉化，代無定型). Zhang further emphasizes differences in the languages used in the past and those of the present. For Zhang, the crucial problem lies in iteration and fixation of 'names'. Drawing on the example of the terms benevolence and justice (*renyi* 仁義), a 'name' used by both the Confucians and Mohists, Zhang suggests that the two schools were indeed responding to different dynasties' problems and had the respective developments according to their temporal moments. Yet *renyi* is only a borrowed term, acting as a substitute for different meanings. The norms and judgements Confucians and Mohists follow are in the opposite direction. Zhang argues that many scholars do not understand the differences in historical contexts and thus value judgement differences.

Thesis 4: The Central Nodal Point is the Empty Site for All Encounters of All Beings on Equal Grounds

For Zhang, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse temporality of all beings. It is only possible to accept the equality of all things and concepts if we let go of fixed conventional norms and customs. Zhang, therefore, proposes to think through Zhuangzi's concept of the central nodal point (*huanzhong* 環中). In Zhuangzi's writings, the rise and fall of ideas are described as the opening and closing of the door in a revolving movement so that new thoughts can come and go instantly. To break through the nominal system's barrier, we need to reassess the signifier's gaps and signify and understand the real meaning according to the context and the time.

Zhang stresses that we need to return to the historical context of names and markers. Words are borrowed vehicles as substitutes (以名為代) and can never recover the original event because they appear merely as the traces of a footprint or the sound of birds. Definition, cause and effect, and substance are all valid at a temporal moment, but their presence diminishes at the very next moment. After numerous iterations, it is difficult to go back to the origin where things were in their place as equal. Zhang's dialectical and materialist method offers us a critical approach to a fixed concept and naming system.

Thesis 5: The Nation Should Be Regarded as the Riverbed, the Place of Emptiness, that Allows the River to Pass By Daily

Zhang interprets the nation as the 'riverbed' (*hechuang* 河床), serving as 'the place of emptiness' (*kongchu* 空處) that allows the river to pass by daily. In other words, the nation

should be considered as an empty place that offers itself to be traversed by different people at different historical moments. The subject (主體) of the nation is merely a ‘void’ (空虛) and ‘non-being’ (非有). Zhang stresses that the term *zhonghua* (中華) is simply a ‘borrowed name as marker’ (託名標識) to indicate the dynamic and altering compositions of changing people in the course of history who have cohabitated the place in different stages. He also explains that the nation is only a temporary dynamic composition, such as the movement of the constitution of the textile woven by warp and woof (經緯相交, 此為組織). In this sense, the composition of the nation can be regarded as a dynamic movement in constant re-composition. The nation has no substance of its own but appears only as a mobile condition (然其組織時, 惟有動態, 初無實體). Zhang further stresses that to have love for the nation (愛國心) is not to love the fixated present state but to love the composition and the ‘not yet germinated’ that is to come in the future (渴望其未萌芽者). Contrary to the contemporary discourse that demands patriotism, Zhang Taiyan deconstructs the notion of patriotism and shatters the myth of a coherent and cultural concept of the integrative and expansive nation. In so doing, Zhang stresses the importance of acknowledging the historical process of the dynamic and constantly altered composition, challenging the fixated law stipulated by the past or by any subjective power, and welcoming the coming of new people and a new composition of the nation.

Thesis 6: To Challenge the Superior, to Modify Antiquity and to Alter the Norm

Zhang Taiyan proposed the notion of ‘*jishang-biangu-yichang*’ (譏上變古易常), that is, to have the courage of constantly challenging the superior, modifying antiquity and altering the norm. It is based on his commitment to the historicity of all things, a practice he learned from the great historian Si Maqian (司馬遷). Ontology for Zhang Taiyan is the site for all encounters and seeds and potential for future happenings. No normative codes can define or restrain future events. One has to keep the space empty to welcome new beings that appear. The nation should also be a place of emptiness to allow future people to come into being. In this dynamic perception of the materiality of reality, history, with its contingencies, also indicates the tendencies affected by all internal and external forces. No rule or regime should be taken for granted or narrated in any linear deterministic perspective.

Zhang’s political and philosophical writings before the fall of the Qing Dynasty and at the early stage of the Republican era demonstrate his rigorous critiques of the unfitnes of the existing regime. His writings caused him to be imprisoned twice because he criticized the Qing Dynasty and Yuan Shikai’s restoration in the republic’s early years. He also criticized Sun Yat-Sen, for Sun established the one-party nation-state after the 1911 revolution. Chiang Kai-shek also was the target of his critique for his over-powering ambition. His writings are still considered the most challenging, complex and inspiring among the late Qing and early Republican thinkers.

Conclusion: Re-encountering the Tradition of Chinese Critical Political Thinking

From Jullien’s elaboration on the concept of *shi*, a question would rise for readers: Is the concept of ontology and political critique possible in Chinese thought?

The answer, to me, is a bold 'yes'. But this simple answer does not suffice to explain the potential for critical thinking in the Chinese tradition. Jullien's analysis of the total manipulation and absolute governance adopted by Chinese regimes is accurate. But, as I have developed my arguments here and in other writings, many critical thinkers in Chinese history can be categorized as proto-socialist critical or materialist dialectical thinkers (Liu, 2017, 2020). The labelling of Confucianist, Daoist or Legalist in conventional scholarship cannot address the complexities and diversities of Chinese thinkers in different historical contexts. This list of critical thinkers has offered us a counter-discourse of critique against the ruling regime's Confucian ideology at various historical moments. They constitute the history of political reforms (*bianfa* 變法, changing the law) against the authoritarian concentration of power. The event of *Pingfa Piru* (Examining the School of Law and Censoring Confucianism) that Jullien encountered in China was a power struggle among the Communist partisans. Jullien's works have entirely neglected this counter-discourse and overlooked the historical contexts of the moment of enunciation behind his lexicon.

I have shown in this essay how the notion of *shi* offers us a different understanding of ontology perceived by Chinese thinkers since Zhuangzi. This understanding of ontology sees the events as multi-originated and interdependent, over-determined by various encounters. All encounters are seeds for the birth of diverse routes. The ruler's manipulation, calculation, arrangement, decision, and position of the situation's potential occupy a strategic subject's status. Confucian scholars since the Han Dynasty have incorporated the discourses of the Legalists and Daoists. They have established a rigid naming system, according to rites (*li* 禮), and the stipulation of allotted status in a hierarchical order, from family relations to the state's social hierarchy, implemented with the penal system. However, thinkers such as Zhuangzi, Zhang Taiyan and a long list of critical thinkers in Chinese tradition insist that we conceive ontology as the constant movement of beings. They would insist we examine the beguilement overshadowed by the naming system and challenge the juridical-political institutions of the time. Challenging and critiquing the ruling regime's nominal system is the first step to exercising the law of equality for all beings and all things, as suggested by Zhuangzi.

A re-reading of Zhuangzi inspires Zhang's political critique, mainly on the heart's ontology as *wu* (void) and the naming system of substitution, reproduction and re-iteration. Zhang's proposal of the interdependency of things in the world encourages us to regard others on an equal footing. Also, he reminds us to challenge the fixated laws, both domestically and globally. Zhang's ontology offers a foundation for political critique. He explains the constraints of subjective perception and the differences of generations through a critical re-reading of Zhuangzi and the Buddhist Vijñānavāda School. When people regard habitual conventions and local norms as unbreakable and fixate them with rules and laws, it does not mean that they are not subjective and partial. Zhang makes an analysis of the image and ideas impressed and received by consciousness. The dialectic relationship between the signifier (name) and signified (substance) explains the paradox of the episteme integral to Zhang's ontology. Zhang re-examines history radically by re-contextualizing the production of the classics as a coincidence in a specific temporal moment, with specific local conventions and customs, and thus with that particular historical mode of judgement. Every moment in the historical process involves changing conditions and situations. This path is led by the situation but also leads to the tendency

of future developments. Every new situation and contestation have their respective effects on the future.

Zhang's interpretation of the nation as a dynamic and constantly changing composition and his invitation to love the not-yet-coming people, I think, has a lot to offer for political thinking of today. François Jullien's rejection of ontology obscures the possibility of such political critique. The contemporary Chinese ruling regime has ironically testified to the validity of Julien's prediction, not of the people's power of critical resistance, but the ruling regime's strategies of governmentality. However, through Zhang Taiyan, we can re-engage with both the transformative ontology of *shi* and critical politics with intellectual forces of resistance.

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