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**Article abstract**

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# Revisiting the connection between context and language from Hall to Jullien: A contribution to a real intercultural dialogue

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Por un reexamen del vínculo entre contexto y lengua, desde Hall hasta Jullien: contribución para un auténtico diálogo intercultural

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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual article offers an interdisciplinary journey from Edward T. Hall to François Jullien, from context to language, and from Europe to China. We focus on international business research where studies must seriously consider language to establish a real intercultural dialogue. In a next step, we turn to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to highlight the ethical issue of translation. Lastly, in line with Jullien's intercultural approach, we invite scholars in international management to go beyond an implicit Western ethnocentrism based on the concept of identity in order to foster in-context management based on the concept of resource.

Keywords: China, Context, Culture, Language, Edward T. Hall, François Jullien, International Business, Translation

### Résumé

Cet article conceptuel propose un parcours interdisciplinaire de Edward T. Hall à François Jullien, entre contexte et langue, Europe et Chine. Nous soulignons que les recherches en management international devraient sérieusement considérer la langue pour établir un véritable dialogue interculturel. Nous examinons ensuite la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme pour souligner la question éthique de la traduction. Enfin, en accord avec l'approche interculturelle de François Jullien, nous invitons les chercheurs en management international à aller au-delà d'un ethnocentrisme occidental implicite basé sur le concept d'*identité* pour favoriser un management en contexte basé sur le concept de *ressource*.

Mots-Clés : Chine, contexte, culture, langue, Edward T. Hall, François Jullien, Management International, Traduction

### Resumen

Este artículo conceptual propone un viaje interdisciplinar desde Edward T. Hall hasta François Jullien, entre el contexto y lengua, Europa y China. Sostenemos que las investigaciones sobre gestión internacional deberían considerar seriamente el idioma para establecer un verdadero diálogo intercultural. A continuación, examinamos la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos para destacar la cuestión ética de la traducción. Por último, en consonancia con el enfoque intercultural de François Jullien, invitamos a los investigadores en gestión internacional a superar el ethnocentrismo occidental implícito basado en el concepto de identidad para favorecer una gestión en contexto basada en el concepto de recurso.

Palabras Clave: China, contexto, cultura, lengua, Edward T. Hall, François Jullien, Gestión Internacional, Traducción



A number of serious factors affect international management knowledge and practices such as the relevance of economic globalization, domination of the English language, and the difficulty of taking cultural diversity into account against the backdrop of a general international crisis. These factors, treated individually, call for specific empirical and/or theoretical disciplinary readings. This article suggests an interdisciplinary approach of reconceptualization with the aim of fostering less ethnocentric, and therefore more ethical and strategic, intercultural dialogue.

The role of context is highlighted because it deserves to be considered in organizational research (Johns, 2017). This is particularly important for international business research (IBR) where studies in international management integrate intercultural communication issues (e.g., Brannen, 2004; Barmeyer, Davoine, 2013; Davoine, Schroeter, Oliver, Stern, 2014; Jaussaud, Mayroffer, 2014; Barmeyer, Davoine, Stokes, 2019; Langinier, Ehrhart, 2019), not to mention the issue of language itself. Horn, Lecomte and Tietze (2020, p. xix) bring to light “the pervasive way language infiltrates a wide range of international business processes”. Moreover, English is increasingly becoming the standard language, not only in international business, but in all academic fields (Wierzbicka, 2014).

Today, as underlined by Horn *et al.*, (2020, p. 223) “language sensitive-research has reached a certain maturity”. However, these authors advocate “a more sophisticated dialogue between ‘culture’ and ‘language’” for IBR and management (p. 224). In IBR, it is relevant to consider the issue of language and especially the way studies treat the question of translation as advocated by Chidlow *et al.*, (2014); Buckley *et al.*, (2014), and D’Iribarne *et al.*, (2020). Most studies implicitly adopt an equivalence paradigm with a technical view of translation based on the following assumption: two different languages “do or can express the same values” (Pym, 2007, p. 272). However, the translation process requires a more contextualized approach that engages the researcher in a process of reflexivity (Horn *et al.*, 2020), especially in a qualitative approach (Xian, 2020). What is at stake is not just a lexical transfer of meaning, but a full process of intercultural interaction.

From this double perspective, involving context and language, this article considers context as a “pre-text”, in a manner of speaking, to revisit its deep links with language. Our conceptual journey builds upon the works of Edward

T. Hall (*Beyond Culture*, 1976), an anthropologist who focused on management. Then it expands the scope through the works of François Jullien, a philosopher and sinologist who is currently renewing the field of intercultural studies, especially through a book published in French in 2008 and in English in 2014 (*On the Universal, the uniform, the common and dialogue between cultures*). It is pertinent to destabilize some cultural preconceptions by applying Jullien’s ideas (Chanlat, Pierre, 2018; De Boever, 2020), especially within contemporary corporations (Bousalham, 2020) at a time marked by various international crises (financial, economic, health, social and political).

Our own approach is designed as a demanding conceptual journey in the field of intercultural studies. It goes beyond the equivalence paradigm in IBR (Chidlow *et al.*, 2014) to open a way between what Jullien calls “easy universalism” and “lazy relativism” (Bompied, 2019, p. 52; De Boever, 2020, p. 15). Furthermore, another added value of this article lies in our clarification of the concept of “universal” on the basis of Jullien’s analysis of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Beyond the interdisciplinary analysis mobilized (involving philosophy, anthropology, history, intercultural communication), our conceptual approach investigates the “gap” between Northwestern countries (notably Anglo-Saxon) and Southeastern countries (Asian cultures) following some critical theoretical reflections in management studies (e.g., Van de Ven, Meyer & Jing, 2018; Filatotchev, Wei, Sarala, Dick, & Prescott, 2019; Xian, 2020). Unlike the comparative approach dominant in cross-cultural studies, we examine this “gap” as a “divergence” (*écart* in French) instead of “difference” as clearly advocated by Chanlat and Pierre (2018, p. 12, 311 & 335, point 16) for intercultural management (the word *écart* is used by Jullien in French but it has no real equivalent in English). By refusing a priori measurable *differences* as suggested by Jullien (2014; 2021) we take a close look at cultural *resources* rather than cultural *identities*. “The notion of cultural resources calls for a more tolerant and reflexive understanding of the idea of culture [...] one that is better suited to empirical complexity of contemporary organizations” (Bousalham, 2020, p. 12). To facilitate this reflexive understanding, especially for researchers, it is important to focus on “the black box” “containing language and translation issues” that is “rarely discussed in business and management research methodology” (Xian, 2020, p. 55).

Our research question primarily contributes to the IBR field: “Which conceptual conditions, between context and language, can promote a real intercultural dialogue by considering the issue of translation?” Our approach invites IB researchers (and managers in MNCs) to pay attention to the cultural resources of each “thought-language” (Jullien, 2020, p. 10). Four parts set up our conceptual reflection. The first part presents the theoretical link between context and language established by Hall and questions its pertinence beyond the recognition that it has received. The second part proposes a *divergence* by assessing the resources of Chinese culture *vis-à-vis* Western culture (Jullien, 2020). Then, the third part questions the viability of the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western cultures via the emblematic text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has its roots in the West. Finally, the fourth part discusses the conditions of a real, ethical dialogue between cultures applying the “universal-uniform-common” trio put forward by Jullien (2014).

## Revisiting the Connection between Context and Language

This section builds on Hall’s seminal work (1976) to revisit the interaction between context and language. It deals with the possible impact of indigenous research and underlines the dangers of the Western dichotomy that favors a decontextualized conception of organizations.

### The possibility of indigenous research

In his famous book entitled *Beyond Culture* (1976), Edward T. Hall defined the concept of high and low contexts: “A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1976, p. 91). Since then, according to Cardon (2008), this dichotomic perception has become an undisputed reference in the academic and professional circles of intercultural management. Most studies to date have accepted Hall’s context theory while neglecting notorious exceptions (Hermeking, 2006). Furthermore, Cardon indicates that Hall never described his theory in a rigorously empirical manner,

and that it has not been validated by any known research involving a measure of *contexting*. In addition, despite the success of his theory, Hall himself was aware of its limitations, asserting that almost all research accepted his model in spite of the lack of empirical validation, resulting in probably unjustified generalizations regarding intercultural business communication (Cardon, 2008).

Thus, beyond the use of an Anglo-Saxon theoretical cradle that favors language to the detriment of context, Hall himself reckons that “without context, the code is incomplete since it encompasses only part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 86). Hall is aware that context is indispensable for language (*the code*), and that context only allows for an incomplete perception of realities. Moreover, Kittler, Rigl and Mackinnon’s study (2011) shows a decline in the popularity of Hall’s theory, not due to the concept itself, but rather to the dubious country classifications related to the concept. Additionally, Kittler *et al.* (2011) single out research publications in English that neglect the classification attempts that might exist in other languages. In particular, they indicate that Asian researchers could react differently to a rather Western concept, and mention recent calls for the advancement of indigenous research. For example, the call for papers concerning the 2010 IACMR (International Association for Chinese Management Research) bi-annual conference in Shanghai sums up the enormous challenges of indigenous research as follows:

- There is little consensus as to the definition of indigenous research. Some maintain that it involves the study of an indigenous subject matter, even if Western theories are adopted; others argue that it requires certain indigenous theoretical factors, but that the dominating contextual frame can be borrowed from the West; others, still maintain that research can only be qualified as indigenous when a locally developed theory is adopted.
- The above-mentioned controversy is linked to the vision and the goal of indigenous research. Is its goal to verify existing Western theories? Is it designed to modify existing Western theories? Does it attempt to develop new theories with wide geocentric implications in order to enrich or even supplant existing Western theories?
- The above-mentioned controversies lead to methodological considerations. Do we simply adopt the methods prevailing in the West? Should we develop indigenous methods for indigenous research?

Kittler *et al.* (2011) also mention conferences on “de-westernizing communication research” such as the one held in Taiwan in 2008 in order to bring the debate to a really global level, not simply Western and regional.

As to management research specifically, Anne Tsui (2013), an American of Chinese origin, underlines that Asian researchers tend to conform to the Western mold, and the North-American one in particular. Thus, a study led by Jia, You and Du (2012) concerning six leading journals (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal*) shows that 95% of publications adopt widely employed US-made theories to study Chinese contexts. Following that study, Tsui (2013, p. 379) warns of the weak, if not inexistent consideration of contextual elements: “Readers may not even know that the study took place in China if the paper did not mention the location of the sample”. Recently, Van de Ven *et al.* (2018) advocated “engaged indigenous research”. They consider that “Universal constructs and perspectives must be either replaced by or complemented with indigenous constructs and perspectives” (p. 452).

### The danger of dichotomy

How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of primarily Western conceptualization and/or modeling? Most of the time, when other cultures are considered (*cross-cultural studies*), analytical work leads to comparison and dichotomization (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018; Chanlat, Pierre, 2018; Nkomo, 2011). Hall himself observes that one of the characteristics of United States culture is a strong inclination to dichotomize almost everything (Hall and Hall, 1987, p. 364). Can we identify Judeo-Christian roots in that fundamental dichotomization which, influenced by Manichaeism, causes us to perceive reality in a binary manner (good/evil; white/black; beautiful/ugly; yes/no, etc.)?

In this domain, which excludes in order to define more exactly (similar to Aristotle’s definition/classification), Hall ranks cultures into distinct categories; he relies on a perception conditioned by the use of a Western language (i.e., English) the grammar of which, founded on rationality, leads to judging. Judging is a rational function in that the thought compartmentalizes, arbitrates and excludes (Jung, 1933). Hall uses the term *explicit* to qualify the *code* (language) utilized to convey information in low-context cultures (Hall, 1976, p. 91). In so doing, he resolutely follows in the steps of a centuries-old dualistic Western perspective.

Hall (1976, p. 89) admits the Greek origin of Western modes of thinking: “the far-reaching consequences of what is attended can be illustrated by a characteristic fault in Western thinking which dates back to the philosophers of ancient Greece. Our way of thinking is quite arbitrary and causes us to look at ideas rather than events—a most serious shortcoming”. Hall is well aware that the Western way of thinking (low context) leads to considering ideas more than events. Alternatively, one can also consider this orientation, which Hall dates back to ancient Greece (Athens), from the standpoint of Christianity (Jerusalem) as Jullien (2021) underlines. Thus, the idea of a Western low context also originates in the biblical conception according to which the “word” is assimilated to God, and so to truth, a notion that Hall views from a scientific standpoint when he asserts that language = truth (Hall, 1976).

A close examination of the first lines of John, Chapter 1 is, in that respect, particularly noteworthy: “When all things began, the Word already was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men” (John, I.1, 2, 3, 4). According to the Bible, in the beginning, there was the *word* (which is a translation of the Greek *Logos*: speech in the original text). To put it another way, without language, which is used to name, nothing exists. Furthermore, since language is linked to God, who is truth, it possesses a creative and vital power, and guides humanity. In other words, when humans use speech, they too have the power to make nature exist. This would explain why Westerners are trapped in a quest for ultimate word accuracy.

### A decontextualized conception of organizations

The world of organizations and management is particularly concerned here. The managerial vocabulary originating from the West does not escape the anthropological quest of a sacred origin. As Eliade notes regarding myths (1959, p. 98): “for it alone reveals the *real*, the superabundant, the effectual”. “We must do what the Gods did in the beginning” says an Indian text (Shatapatha Brahmana, VII, 2, 1, 4). “Thus the Gods did; thus men do” the Taittiriya Brahmana adds (1, 5, 9, 4). Despite his apparent distance from Eliade’s *homo religiosus*, the modern manager, heir of the “organization man”, unconsciously imitates God the Creator. He/she relies on an explicit language, looking for truths, at the risk of neglecting the context. That is what William Whyte described back in 1956, in *The Organization Man*, namely a corporate world under the influence of the



culture of scientism. Thus Hall (1976, p. 93) underlines: “Modern management methods, for which management consultants are largely responsible, are less successful than they should be, because in an attempt to make everything explicit (low-contexting again), they frequently fail in their recommendations to take into account what people already know.” For Hall, “this is a common fault of the consultant, because few consultants take the time (and few clients will pay for the time) to become completely contexted in the many complexities of the business.”

Hall was already criticizing the managerial posture that consists in desiring to explicate and name, and so verbalize everything. Just as significant and symptomatic of the difference between low and high context is the following anecdote found in a professional communication textbook: “A Japanese manager explained his culture’s communication style to an American: We are a homogeneous people and don’t have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one” (Chaturvedi, 2011, p. 47). In the East, and more particularly in Chinese and Japanese cultures (considered as high-context cultures by Hall), the word does not exist in the same way.

## Opening a Divergence from the Chinese Side with François Jullien

At a time when China is becoming one of the key leaders of the world’s economic development by massively adopting Western economic and managerial practices (Shrivastava, Persson, 2018), this second section is based on Chinese traditional culture, removed from an often implicit Western grounding. Here we propose, with Jullien (2015), “to enter a way of thought” (*entrer dans une pensée*), and underline the divergence (*écart*) between cultures (Jullien, 2020).

### Beyond Western grounding

While complex and multi-institutional cultures are regarded as belonging to the low-context category, Hall (1976, p.92) ranks China among high-context countries: “The need for context is experienced when looking up words in a Chinese dictionary. To use a Chinese dictionary, the reader must know the meaning of 214 radicals... To be literate in Chinese, one has to be conversant with Chinese history.

In addition, the spoken pronunciation system must be known, because there are four tones, and a change of tone means a change of meaning”.

In his search for the sensual foundations of language, Abram (1997) makes a clear distinction between Indo-European languages and others. The former lead to “alphabetical” civilizations. They use a language disconnected from all contact with the natural environment, unlike languages that use “pictographic, ideographic, and/or rebuslike characters” (Abram, 1997, p.138). In Eastern cultures, language cannot be self-sufficient; it remains primarily connected to the natural environment. In this way, the Chinese language “still retains pictorial ties to the phenomenal world of sensory experience” (p.111). Jullien (2015, p. 93) specifies that it is “a language almost without grammar, a language that neither declines nor conjugates, that marks morphologically neither passive, nor active, neither plural nor singular, neither time nor mood”. Classical Chinese uses only very few prepositions and coordinating conjunctions. This requires paying particular attention to what is said and written, and to the context.

### “Entering a way of thought”

Everything leads to necessarily and indispensably take into account what Jullien (2015) calls “entering a way of thought”. *Entrer dans une pensée* is the title of the book published in French in 2012, which was published in English as *The Book of Beginnings* in 2015. Jullien encourages us not to contemplate a culture through a given system of thought (Western), but to apprehend it by entering it: “to pass from an outside to an inside” (Jullien, 2015, p. 1). This should not be perceived as an opposition, but rather a movement or a passage. The key is the idea of a “threshold”. To enter someone else’s thought, you have to leave your own. From the first sentences of the Bible for the European side and from the I Ching (an ancient, seminal divination and wisdom text) for the Chinese side, Jullien (2015) highlights not only how each language operates, but also “the ways of thought in which they are inscribed” (Jullien, 2015, book flap).

For Jullien (2015, p. 15-16), we are in “an ambiguous historical situation” without being sufficiently able to analyze the nature of the “crisis” (the term proposed by Husserl) generated by globalization. Yet the Western approach has reigned for far too long by imposing an ethno-centered reading grid (especially the model-making approach of science, the capitalist productivity of economics and the universality of democratic rights). Moreover, this Western approach has

obviously been successfully standardized through the use of a single language: English. This leads Wierzbicka (2014, p. 64) to the following observation: “In a globalized world in which English has become, effectively, the first ever global lingua franca, it is increasingly easy to forget that the whole world doesn’t think in English. If humankind does share some deep moral intuitions on which a global ethic could build, then these intuitions must relate to particular speakers’ conceptual worlds”.

Wierzbicka sums up the current situation by arguing that on the one hand, not only does each culture think in a given language, but that on the other hand, through globalization, the English language imposes a way of thinking that does not consider the variety of the conceptual worlds of individual speakers. As tenuous as it seems a priori, the divergence between Western cultures matters too. Consequently, even from one Western language to another, Jullien’s idea consisting in moving “from an outside to an inside” (2015, p. 1) remains pertinent. The very idea of context does not seem to be exclusive to the modern era, for in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Montaigne had a similar intuition, although he did not theorize it. On the natives of Brazil, he wrote: “I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation according to what I have been told, except that everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not according to his usage” (Montaigne, 1949, p. 82).

### When texts and language remain connected to the context

Thought, interacting with language, provides information on the context. Jullien specifies that: “we must not go so far as to say that language determines thought, but we must say that thought *exploits*, cultivates the resources of language” (Ping, Jullien, 2016, p. 118). Therefore, analyzing thought fundamentally starts with the language that conveys it. China is a suitable external place from where to look into Western cultures, for its language (Classical Chinese) and its philosophies were not shaped by the syntax and etymology of Indo-European languages. Western civilization did not influence China until modern times. Several-thousand-year-old Chinese heritage abounds with classical texts that one can consult directly. The major deconstructing enterprise undertaken by Jullien is based on a literary analysis of fundamental Chinese texts belonging to the main schools, also identified by Chen and Lee (2008).

Jullien works by placing Chinese texts in vis-à-vis pairings with Greek, Latin (notably Plato, Plotinus), German and French texts (Hegel, Heidegger, Kant, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Foucault etc.). It is worth specifying that the deconstruction work of written texts is carried out in the respective original languages (Chinese, Greek, French, German). Jullien is particularly careful to avoid relying on the comfort of complacent translations that overshadow the meaning of original Chinese texts and commentaries.

Traditional Chinese thought operates through a single language (Classical Chinese) in which the notion of time is circular, driven by the recurring seasons, without aiming at establishing progress. “I recognize, however, that answering this question no doubt requires that we accomplish a very difficult feat of intellectual accommodation (in the sense in which we speak of accommodation of the eye through an automatic change of focal length), for it demands that we free ourselves from the expectations the idea of finality projects in the Western context” (Jullien, 2007, p. 107-108).

At the managerial level this idea of finality is especially explicit in the MBO (management by objectives) model initially devised by Peter Drucker for the USA. Since then, MBO, largely taught in business schools, has spread to the five continents, contributing to a cultural belief in a “universal management utopia” (D’Iribarne *et al.*, 2020, part 1) with different successes vs failures (see annex 1). This universal management utopia deserves to be questioned beyond statistical approaches, not only through a qualitative approach, but also regarding its foundational values. Especially, “Corporate ethics is a privileged field in which the universal and the local meet” (D’Iribarne *et al.*, 2020, p. 165) translated in many guidelines such as “code of ethics, code of conduct, or principles of action” in MNEs to promote diversity, CSR, and other cardinal values or beliefs. We approach these cardinal values and beliefs in the next section in light of the emblematic universal declaration of human rights.

## The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This emblematic text, despite its Western foundations, is supposed to have a universal vocation. By questioning this universal vocation and its conditions of emergence, it becomes possible to open a way for a better understanding of cultures and even to take advantage of their diversity, as seen in the next section.

### A short story of the declaration dedicated to human rights

It is not easy to understand and therefore question the issue of human rights because they are a perfect example of a truly beautiful articulation between the absolute and the singular to the order of the values and the political (Jullien, 2014, chap X). Thus, Gibbs (2017, p. 521) explains: “Understanding the formative function of human rights is difficult in part because of our inheritance, through the liberal constitutional tradition, of an understanding of human rights as foundational for social relations as opposed to a broader notion of the complex process of social formation”. That is why it is easy, from this inherent perspective, to take for granted a narrative “presenting human rights as a self-evident component of any legitimate constitutional framework” (Gibbs, 2017, p. 521).

Historically, it appears that the issue of human rights has evolved. It is possible for Gibbs (2017, p. 521) “to draw a line originating from the natural rights discourse developed by John Locke, through the American and French revolutionary settlements, down to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948”. Finalized just after WWII, and the discovery of the Shoah, the current version of the declaration was solemnly adopted in Paris by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and went on to become the most translated text in the world (more than 500 languages). In the preamble of the declaration (easily available on line), the text defines “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”. The text ends with “that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms”. To this end, “progressive measures, national and international” have to be adopted “to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction”. Therefore, beyond its Western foundations, the declaration was exported to all other countries based on a claim of universality. The different articles of the declaration are thought out in terms of values that are deemed cardinal in a humanistic perspective of progress.

The claim for the universality of human rights through the values it promotes can be misunderstood as it is introduced in a context of standardized lifestyles on a global scale. Gauchet (2009) underlines the power of such standardization (*uniformisation* in French) of the world, despite the fact that not everyone

embraces it. This standardization constitutes westernization, at least economically, whereby capitalism is completing its globalization. It then becomes easy to consider under the guise of generalized free exchange, that the time of the universal has come. At least many Westerners think this way, confident about the appropriateness of their values.

Gauchet (2009) distinguishes two major stages in globalization. The first, willingly qualified as colonialist, took place in the light of the Western imperialist cultural domination that was imposed on the rest of the world. Today, in the wake of decolonization, the second globalization is being accomplished with free adoption by the rest of the world of the recipes that have proven reliable in the West. After all, no one forced the Chinese communists to convert to the market, says Gauchet sarcastically. We are henceforth in a single world where the same rules prevail everywhere (Gibbs, 2017). “But for a start, is this convergence so general? And can we therefore conclude that universality is indeed effective?” asks Gauchet (2009, p. 163, translated from the French by the authors). Without giving up the concept of the universal, François Jullien (2014) answers with a warning against the ethnocentric arrogance with which the West, spurred by the economic success of its model, decrees the universality of its civilization and values (Gauchet, 2019).

### Jullien’s intercultural analysis: the universal in question

For Jullien, human rights constitute a recent but rarely shared certainty. They represent the Western emblem of the *universal* in its primary sense, the most absolute, which, in other words, applies to everyone (Bompied, 2019, p. 49). In his concern to thwart unquestioned certainties, Jullien suggests an approach qualified as “geological” by Bompied (2019, p. 49). As a matter of fact, Jullien (2014; 2021) reconstructs a scattered history, highlighting multiple impulses that constitute heterogeneous plans (from Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christian religion) and that only reassemble in the modern era.

First and foremost, Jullien (2014, p. 101) questions the claim to universality, saying: “Wouldn’t it once again be the case that, contrary to what it says about itself, the pretension to universality is the only way a threatening heterogeneity can be held together—that is, by leaving it behind?” In the history of ideas, the current conception of the human rights must integrate several heritages: nominalism from the late medieval thinkers (Duns Scotus, William of Ockham);



Spanish scholastic philosophy (Suarez); and then the notion of Hobbes's "right of nature", which Locke and Rousseau considered should be negotiated through a social contract (Jullien, 2014, chapter X). Secondly, Jullien (2014, p. 102) calls on the exclusive ownership of the rights ascribed to humans: "But when it comes to 'rights', why would they be precisely those of Man, who alone is able to make himself absolute by rising to the unconditioned status of a universal?". In fact, it is only since modern times that the anthropocentric conception has considered humans to be the first beneficiaries of rights, in opposition to a previous, more collective conception of rights (and duties), notably in the context of the city according to the specialists of Roman law, echoing the famous dichotomic dimension of collectivism vs individualism developed by Geert Hofstede.

Therefore, how can we explain the power, theoretically at least, wielded by the Declaration, despite the ups and downs of its Western history and its primarily anthropological foothold at a time when health and ecological crises are primary concerns all over the planet? If we follow Jullien (2014) or the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) in their very similar analyses produced independently (without citing each other), the strength of the Declaration is more implicit than explicit, underlying the expressed words. The latent power of the message is based on the refusal of cruelty for Rorty (1989) and the refusal of the unbearable for Jullien (2014). This refusal arises from the text in its negative side (the underlying context) more than in its positive side (the words used). The text is explicitly based on legal equality for all; but in fact, it proceeds from an entanglement between humans in which the refusal of suffering, for oneself and for others, becomes more tacit than explicit, rooted in a common experience of living.

Jullien's interpretation based on the refusal of the unbearable paves the way to *relationality* taking precedence over European *rationality*, with relationality being more natural on the Chinese side. Chen and Miller (2011, p. 6) underline the relational philosophy of the Chinese tradition of thought "in which all entities are conceived to exist within the context of one another and in which integration, balance, and harmony are sought over distinction and comparison". This relational perspective appears "as a thought system in which concepts and entities enjoy no final definition, but are constantly redefined by their context" (p. 7).

What then are the epistemological implications? Opening a way from rationality to relationality leads us to rapidly consider the methodological debates between *emic* (culture specific) and *etic* (universal) approaches as presented by Pike (1954). *Etic* concepts and procedures are supposed to have a universal value whereas *emic* concepts and procedures embrace culture-specific characteristics. An *etic*-type approach mobilizes a remote reading based on a time-tested theoretical frame. Buckley *et al.* (2014) state that the majority of IB studies have been *etic* although the cross-cultural data used by the researchers have been *emic* in nature. The *etic* approach is also evaluated as dominant by Chidlow *et al.* (2014) who analyze a decade of qualitative and quantitative studies in IBR to problematize the way translation is tackled in these studies. They encourage us to go beyond the equivalence paradigm (Pym, 2007). As underlined by Buckley *et al.* (2014, p. 322) "the search for equivalence should no longer be a prime ambition of cross-cultural research". In fact, "indigenous research must reflect the uniqueness of local constructs and contexts, which, by default, requires embracing a local (emic) perspective rather than a foreign (etic) point of view" explain Van de Ven *et al.* (2018, p. 452).

The second approach (*emic*) prompts us to abandon the dominant comparison register built from a Western thought process to establish a real dialogue between cultures, as Jullien (2014; 2021) encourages explicitly. Researchers have innovated in this register through a real inclusion of indigenous dynamics ("indigenous approach") as advocated by Van de Ven *et al.* (2018). Thus, Fang (2012) proposes rebuilding intercultural analyses on Yin Yang dynamics. Chen and Miller (2010; 2011) advocate an East-West dialogue considering what they call the *ambicultural*ity of management. Directly connected with Jullien's approach, Bousalham (2020) deconstructs so-called "shared values" to promote a more inclusive definition of organizational culture valuing divergences. Facing the challenge of global warming, Shrivastava and Persson (2018, p. 130) ask: "what could be the leading role of China if we consider its ambiguous contradictions by adding Chinese-colored glasses to the Western-colored glasses?"

## Toward a real *inter-cultural* dialogue *between* cultures

*Inter-cultural* comprised two juxtaposed words in order to isolate the one that could seem to be the least important: *inter*. In so doing we follow the line

established by Chanlat and Pierre (2018, p. 313-314) in the conclusion of their book dedicated to intercultural management. In this final part, we underline what is at stake with the prefix *inter* which reveals the full extent of the divergence or distance (*écart*) between cultures, instead of talking about differences as usual (as found in Hall and Hall, 2000), and without ignoring the issue of language itself (Ping, Jullien, 2016). By escaping the comfortable notion of “difference”, it becomes possible to establish cultures in a mutual reflection as a condition for a real cultural otherness (Jullien, 2012a; 2012b) and then to fully welcome indigenous cultures: “Universal constructs and perspectives must be either replaced by or complemented with indigenous constructs and perspectives” advocate Van de Ven *et al.* (2018, p. 352). In order to achieve this, we must avoid amalgamating the three concepts analyzed by Jullien (2014): the *uniform* (of globalization) the *universal* (of philosophy) and the *common* (of politics). This approach is *the* conceptual condition to promote a strong philosophical notion of dialogue as requested by Jullien. Because the word “*dia*-logue” evokes both the “in-between” (*l’entre*) and a “path” through the Greek word *dia*, Jullien harshly criticizes an apparently peaceful and egalitarian dialogue “most often held in globalized English or *globish*” (De Boever, 2020, p. xiii).

### On the universal, the uniform, and the common

The Declaration of Human Rights features an absolute request as an ultimate principle of legitimacy, i.e. that institutions and social relations should align on the equal freedom of individuals. However, the Declaration does not explain how to proceed, nor deliver any instructions (Gauchet, 2009). Hence, it calls for dialogue (rather than revolution). To promote a true dialogue between cultures, without overshadowing the question of the means by which this dialogue could be effectively held in context, Jullien (2014) sheds a precious conceptual light. This clarification is salutary in as much as a great deal of our future lies on the distinctions between *universal*, *uniform* and *common* according to Gauchet (2009). In the context of growing globalization, Jullien (2014) offers explanations to deal with these damaging ambiguities because of their equivocal meanings.

The *universal*, based on intangible values, refers to philosophy; the *uniform*, based on standardization refers to economics; and the *common*, based on sharing (and not similarity), refers to politics. Thus, the growing uniformity of our way of life is firstly generated and adopted in order to favor economic growth. This is not necessarily for the common good and cannot claim universal legitimacy.

There upon, and without providing a reminder here of the opposite readings of international management that lean towards cultural convergence or divergence, we doubt that management practices would benefit by becoming uniform (Li, Leung, Chen, Luo, 2012; Chanlat, Pierre, 2018). On the contrary, without breaking with universal “values” (particularly in their implicit and latent extent rather than in their explicit extent as specified in the previous section), management practices can foster better conditions and more suitable processes for living and working together. Such practices must recognize the resources of the specific cultural contexts and languages in which they are deployed (Davoine *et al.*, 2014; Chanlat, Pierre, 2018; Langinier, Ehrhart, 2019).

The universal is the opposite of the uniform because it presupposes diversity without an intrinsic scale of value. This is the price that the universal must pay in order to become a viable ideal. This is how Jullien (2014) eliminates the damaging ambiguity between two concepts, which allows us to more clearly position the political issue of human rights, that is to say the common good that underlies successful living together, including in the workplace (Bousalham, 2020).

In matters of intercultural philosophy, notably as far as the question of human rights is concerned, Jullien seeks to avoid the two temptations of “easy universalism” and “lazy relativism” (Bompied, 2019, p. 52) clarified by De Boever (2020, p. 15): “a universalism that is identity-driven and exports a certain property to the rest of the world, flattening it, rendering it uniform; or a relativism that allows all cultures to exist in their isolated bubbles”. Universalism is qualified as easy if one considers the universal as coming from a nature that philosophy discovered and translated into positive rights to which the rest of the world simply have to conform. As to relativism, it is qualified as lazy when it identifies each culture with its specific features as a kind of unspeakable “truth”. This culturalism then builds up at the risk of generating a community-centered attitude. Hence the importance of maintaining a clarification of the concepts and avoiding damaging confusions.

If the uniform is simply the by-product of increasingly questioned globalized economic model (particularly on the Western side which spawned that uniformity), the universal deserves to remain a supreme reference on the philosophical registry. In order to move in that direction, Jullien (2014) sets a condition by introducing a distinction between the *universalizing* and the *universalizable*: “The

universalizable belongs to the dimension of truth, legitimacy and representation because it touches on the problem of possibility. On the contrary, the universalizing, as its gerund form indicates, evokes a process of creation or production of the universal” (Nakajima, 2016, p. 95).

Human rights pertain to universalizing: they constitute a common goal for the whole of humanity without postulating any universalizable a priori. In other words, they are not sent down from the sky or dictated by reason (low context), but rather they come up out of the earth that bears them (high context) and they deserve to be expressed in all languages. This is the cost at which the universal in its universalizing function offers a regulating goal to the political. The third concept, the common, thus remains open (because not ethnocentric), avoiding too many binary interpretations (as seen in Samuel Huntington’s books for example).

### Towards intercultural ethics

Jullien resolutely refuses the current dominating comparatism in the field of intercultural communication by emphasizing what is literally at stake: “not to compare but to reflect” (Jullien, 2020, p. 186). Jullien organizes “*interfaces* between Chinese and European thoughts such that, through divergences, one will be drawn to examine oneself in the other and reciprocally”. Rather than functioning on the usual basis of cultural *identities*, Jullien suggests mobilizing the diversity of cultural *resources* through the coherent integration of linguistic contributions as recommended by Wierzbicka (2014).

Thinking is not knowing, as Jullien likes to point out. The opposite of *knowledge* is ignorance, but what contradicts it is *connivance* (Jullien, 2020, chapter X) establishing a parity between knowledge and connivance. “Whereas knowledge necessarily brings a rupture, connivance does not presuppose such a cut” (De Boever, p. 24). When the stated objective of intercultural research is to “know” an unfamiliar culture, one can merely compare it to a standard yardstick (generally one’s own culture which is self-evident). One is then engaged in full comparatism: one talks about cultural “differences” which one tries to come to grips with in order to better identify them. That is how many studies describe cultural “identities” based on “values” and “standards” assessed against Western principles. These studies are totally in line with classic science (Demorgon, 2014) leading to the spread of comparative works in cross-cultural studies, notably in the vein of Hofstede. Once again, can we really talk about intercultural

“dialogue” when this dialogue is accompanied by the paradigm of equivalence in IBR, a standardization of practices in international management and when it is expressed only in English? In this regard, d’Iribarne *et al.* (2020, chapter X) provide many examples to warn to the possibilities of misunderstanding of a linguistic and contextual nature, especially “from simple false friend to differently connoted senses” in interpersonal communication (p. 194).

Knowing another culture implies a minimal connivance with that culture by accepting to enter into its way of thinking and language (Jullien, 2015). Only on these terms will there be an open possibility for a true intercultural dialogue in the etymological sense of the *dia-logos*: two ways of thinking, the logos itself, as a blend of logic and discourse, and also a matter of the language in which one thinks. Exhibiting language research (and literary research in many of his books), Jullien’s work actually proves to be quite interdisciplinary. The philosopher and sinologist takes up several leading authors from the 20th century French school of thought who reflected upon structural linguistics: Barthes, Foucault, Levi-Strauss, and Benveniste (Bompied, 2019, p. 161). However, it is on the issue of translation that Jullien particularly sets himself apart.

### Translation as ethics

The globalized contemporary world needs a philosophy of intercultural relations apt to invest and better mobilize the diversity of cultural resources (Jullien, 2021). This is the case at the national level through migratory phenomena and regional varieties. The dominating tendency to compare cultures implies too often that a meta-norm exists a priori, and that the primary norm is Western and expressed primarily in English. There is no such thing as primary culture highlight Chanlat and Pierre (2018, p. 339). For Jullien, what is common within the “universal, uniform, common” tryptic is constantly being rebuilt, while mistrusting uniformity, which tends to rule and must not be confused with the universal. Thus, Jullien pushes for a dialogue between cultures. However, he does not conceal the fundamental issue of language (Jullien, 2014, p. 160): “But in what language should the dialogue take place, if it is *between cultures* [...] Suppose culture is approached first of all from language (rather than from the religion, ideology and so on) and that language is already thought. I will answer without fear of paradox: each should do so in his language, but by *translating* the other”.

Jullien's work suggests a paradigm of cultural exchange based on translation. "Far from being a handicap, as an obstacle and source of opacity—the punishment of Babel—it is the necessity to translate which puts cultures mutually to work. I consider translation to be the only possible ethic of the 'global' world to come" (Jullien, 2014, p. 161). According to Jullien, translating constitutes an ethical gesture *par excellence* by allowing (inviting and demanding at the same time) the *relationality* discussed above to fully happen as an intimate meeting. As suggested by Chanlat and Pierre (2018, p. 315-316 and 348) for intercultural management, this meeting corresponds closely to an ethical choice. It constitutes an open invitation as much as a demand. Indeed, in the translation process, one must be faithful and invent both at the same time. Then one must mobilize diverse cultural resources rather than identities that could be ranked according to an impossible single model. These resources are, on the one hand, linked to both specific and evolving cultural contexts, and on the other hand, linked to language practice itself. Thus, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has rightly become the most translated text in the world as we have already mentioned. Its strength lies in its definition of a political horizon (building the common) as a regulatory ideal (the universalizing of the universal) in a truly ethical process: translation, which is not easy, especially in Chinese (see annex 2).

Although we have not analyzed the translation process of the Declaration, we invite researchers (and managers) to be vigilant with regard to the equivalence paradigm (Pym, 2007) and the associated technicist view of translation. For researchers operating in multilingual contexts, we echo Chidlow *et al.* (2014, p. 576) in their request: "we would argue that IB research necessarily *is* about translation". Then "language is regarded not as a barrier to, but rather as a source of theoretical insight" (p. 576). "Babel is the chance of thought" repeats Jullien (2012a, p. 41, translated by De Boever, 2020, p. 14). Instead of just looking for delineated identities through comparison as is the trend in cross-cultural studies (Jullien, 2012b; 2014), the issue of translation opens "in-between spaces" for novel theorizing (Chidlow *et al.*, 2014, p. 576). This focus on language "resonates with Jullien's overall method" (De Boever, 2020, p. 114).

Translation is ethics because it occurs at the heart of interculturalism: not just a symbolic heart but a practical one. It becomes a matter of *meeting* more than just *relationality* (Chanlat, Pierre, 2018, p. 315-316): It requires an "intelligence

of the sensible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). It is not just a question of knowledge but also a question of connivance (Jullien, 2020, chapter X). Connivance is an operative concept able to work as a sensory and relational knowledge. As explained by Jullien, knowledge and connivance stay on equal footing, but also back-to-back. In the translation process, an awareness of the living physicality of the language must occur. This is not comfortable: "L'interculturel est tension, synonyme de résistance, d'ouverture à l'autre et d'incertitude" (we translate as "interculturalism is tension, is synonymous with resistance, with opening to the other, with uncertainty") (Chanlat, Pierre, 2018, p. 14). That is especially true at the workplace because work is an "épreuve de la matérialité" ("physicality test") (p.15).

In the international corporate world, it is not always easy to maintain the use of several languages, including at the local level. This implies a resistance to the uniformity sought by the dominating language (most often English) or that of the executive managers, for example French for a Swiss company studied by Davoine *et al.* (2014). In a cross-border context, Langinier and Ehrhardt (2019) speak of *translanguaging* practices between France and Germany. Maintaining a collective ability to spread such *translanguaging* practices in a multicultural context allows for a combination of linguistic resources serving better integration of employees. It resists uniformity, implied by solely using the dominating language; it opens on the *common* (Jullien, 2014, chapter III) in keeping with diversity.

## Conclusion

Attuned to the conceptual critical approach which we deliberately mobilized, this article raises more questions than answers. However, by opening a divergent conceptual door to ambiculturalism (Chen, 2014) from some critical articles in the IBR field, it suggests a reflexivity process, in line with Horn *et al.* (2020, p. 224-229), to all researchers who work in the field of so-called cross-cultural studies and international management, especially in or with China (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018; Xian, 2020). It is also designed for those who, more broadly, mobilize the concepts of diversity and identity, particularly in the field of intercultural communication by inviting them to be aware of their *etic* vs *emic* posture in research (Pike, 1954).

Revisiting the connection between context and language from the works of E.T. Hall allowed us to underline debatable classifications, together with research

done in English glossing over classifications that could exist in other languages (Kittler *et al.*, 2011). We then chose to enter another “thought-language”, i.e. classical Chinese, with Jullien (2015; 2020). In so doing, we mobilized a heterotopia (a thought coming from elsewhere), beyond Western utopias, reminding us of Foucault’s words: If “utopias allow for consolation”, “heterotopias are disturbing” (Foucault, 2001: xviii).

The aim of this article is to suggest a conceptual deviation in order to disturb a perhaps too-well-established thought (Bompied, 2019), and, following Jullien’s method, invite researchers to enter into in-depth reflexivity. Our approach is strategic, ethical, and political, in the perspective advocated by Chanlat and Pierre (2018), in order to promote interculturalism. This seems not only pertinent but necessary in the field of international business, which has been shaken by successive crises.

We question economic globalization supported by one dominating language and its associated way of thinking. Our investigation applies operational concepts to think, practice, and experience a true otherness combining rationality and *relationality* in context. This article allows a better understanding of the need for companies to take into account local specific conditions when seeking to promote a global approach to markets (for example Jaussaud, Mayroffer, 2014). The authors explain the legitimacy of translanguaging practices in context as analyzed by Langinier and Ehrhart (2019) who advocate translanguaging in respect of language ecology. This means that management must be apt to mobilize evolving cultural resources rather than define fixed identities and values (Bousalham, 2020).

This paper contributes to the field of Intercultural Management (Chanlat, Pierre, 2018; D’Iribarne *et al.*, 2020). On the one hand, it avoids the model of national references (as found in Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner) based on comparison to define cultural identities. On the other hand, it abstains from adopting cultural relativism, because it encompasses a philosophical demand by revisiting the issue of the universal with Jullien (2014) and Gauchet (2009). We can then suggest avenues for research to better approach any reflexive divergence in the study of translation in international business before operationalizing it.

Before economic globalization, a theoretical globalization occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gauchet, 2009). From a theoretical point of view, our analysis shows the risks of harmful confusion between what partakes of the *universal*, the

*uniform*, and the *common* for a real dialogue between cultures. A further research could examine Jullien’s approach directly in the light of postcolonial theory (De Boever, 2020), especially for MNCs (Bousseba, Morgan, 2014), to better understand and manage multilingual workplaces (Horn *et al.* 2020). With regard to indigenous research, it seems necessary to avoid binary oppositions between colonial and anti-colonial representations (Nkomo, 2011) to open a real space for reflexivity by taking context and language into account. Especially, on a practical level, a better understanding of the Chinese business is still necessary when the Western culture of truth faces the Chinese culture of transformation (Chieng, 2007). A deeper analysis of translated texts could show how a kind of misunderstanding was maintained for a long time, by translating the Chinese word *dao* by the European word *truth* for example (Chieng, 2007, p. 20).

In the modern era, the center of the world was first European (French was the dominating language). Then it became Anglo-Saxon and North American (English became the dominating language). Today it is moving to Asia and China. The most widely spoken language is Chinese (20%). The language of business and science is English or rather Globish, an impoverished language if any. Language being the first resource of thought, will science also have to subscribe to that impoverishment?

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## ANNEX 1

### The hazards of “universal management utopia”

D'Iribarne *et al.* (2020) provide three examples to warn about “universal management utopia” which particularly comes from Anglo-Saxon managerial culture such as Peter Drucker's MBO (management by objective) doctrine.

The authors use the example of a Tunisian company that wanted to introduce an evaluation system for individual performance based on an American system in order to improve efficiency. The employees soon realized that the system impacted their bonus negatively. The management understood that there were “risks of division between team members that could occur due to an excessive individualization of performance measurement” (p. 34).

In the same way, D'Iribarne *et al.* (2020) examined the reactions of Parisian Metro employees when the top management wanted to use MBO to decentralize the organization. The new system aimed to introduce individual recognition based on “clear, measurable, and shared objectives” (p. 38). The French employees did not like the idea of working under the supervision of their line manager. As D'Iribarne *et al.* explain: “it is the idea they have of their mission and their profession, rather than the desire to be seen in a good light by their superior, which motivates their involvement. They even consider as servile and self-serving the intentions of those who are overzealous in meeting the expectations of their hierarchy” (p. 38). The result was a major modification of the initial individual performance measurement, and collective performance indicators were preferred.

D'Iribarne *et al.* (2020) also provide the example of a Vietnamese start-up whose CEO had decided to introduce an American management system based on MBO. The Vietnamese employees did not understand the goal of the system and were very skeptical regarding its efficiency. D'Iribarne *et al.* explain that Vietnamese employees saw the future as something unpredictable and had less clear ideas about the future than Americans. “They had a much more unstable vision of the world (Jullien, 1997)\*” (p.42) and, contrary to Americans, thought it was impossible to manage it via objectives.

\*Jullien (1997) *Traité de l'efficacité*, Grasset is the French version of Jullien (2004) in English

## ANNEX 2

### The Declaration of Human Rights and translation risks

The English version seems true to the original intention formulated in French, but the Chinese translation remains debatable.

Below are the remarks of Dennis Yue Feng who assessed the Chinese translation.

“I read the translation, I think from Jullien's lens, you and I would both recognize that the author is oblivious to the differences between the cultural conceptions of reality. I notice the translation of key terms:

- **Human right:** translated into 人权 *ren quan* or human power
- **Inalienable right:** translated into 不移的权利 *bu yi de quan li*, or unmovable power
- **Justice:** translated into 正义 *zheng yi*, with 正 meaning centred, and 义 is the virtue spoken of by Mencius, which is to do with dao and not to do with the Western metaphysical justice. I remember that Jullien wrote about 义 *yi* especially when talking about Confucian and Mencius.

None of these terms are justified in terms of the language differences.

The author's way of translating is the common way, which is without awareness of the differences between the conceptions of reality behind the languages, and and conceives translation as homogenous”.