



A Treatise on Efficacy

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A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking by Francois Jullien

Summary

1. This book is about the diverging patterns of efficacy between Western and Chinese thinking. The Western model of efficacy, inherited from the ancient Greeks' conception of action, seeks to attain directly a predetermined goal through voluntary and assertive action. The Chinese tend to evaluate the power inherent in a situation (*shi*) and transform it through non-assertiveness, relying on the "propensity" of things in such a way that *the result takes place of itself*. The Chinese strategist manipulates his own troops and the enemy to win a battle without waging war and to bring about victory *effortlessly*. Efficacy in China is thus conceived of in terms of transformation (as opposed to action) and manipulation. To summarize the difference between Western and Chinese thought: one *constructs* a model that is then projected onto the situation, which implies that the situation is momentarily "frozen". The other *relies* on the situation as on a disposition that is known to be constantly evolving. It is a disposition that functions as a device.

Western Efficacy	Chinese Efficacy
Means / Ends	Conditions / Consequences
Model-Making	Process
Hypothetical	Inevitable
Destruction	Keep enemy intact (deconstruction)
Subject	Environment / Consequences
Actions / Heroic (loud, direct, visible, impartial, transient)	Transformation (quiet, indirect, discrete, complete)
Heroism / Difficulty	Facility

Key Takeaways

1. Overview
 1. The Greeks thought of efficacy on the basis of abstract, ideal forms, set up as models to be projected onto the world and that our will deliberately establishes as a goal to be attained. This is the tradition of a plan devised in advance and the heroism of action. Depending on one's point of view, it is a tradition of means and ends, or of the interrelation between theory and practice. But far away in China, we discover a concept of efficacy that teaches one to learn how to allow an effect to come about: not to aim for it (directly) but to implicate it (as a consequence), in other words, not to seek it, but simply to welcome it – to allow it to result. The ancient Chinese tell us that it is enough to know how to make the most of the way a situation develops and to let yourself be "carried" along by it. You do not rack your brains, you do not struggle or strive. But that is not at all



because you wish to disengage from the world; rather, it is the better to succeed in it. To describe this kind of intelligence that bypasses the theory-practice relationship and instead depends solely on the way that things evolve, let us use the term “strategic.” As we study it, we shall find ourselves wondering whether we, for our part, including even those who have opted for “realism” when faced with the power of ideas or ethics – from Aristotle to Machiavelli or to Clausewitz – have ever really thought through the concept of efficacy. We may even come to wonder whether the notion of efficacy itself is not too limited or clumsy to capture the means of producing reality or allowing it to come about.

2. If you begin by constructing a model, your only possible relation with the future takes the form of a projection (and anything that will not fit into the project has to be relegated to the domain of chance). But if your starting point is the potential of the situation, your relation to the future is one of *anticipation*. Sticking closely to the regulatory curve of its revolution and detecting in the existing situation a sign of the beginning of the change that will happen, you have, logically enough, a head start over its unfolding. So, rather than detect omens in the universe, interpret their meaning, and deploy their symbolism – in short, rather than heave hermeneutically (Western hermeneutics being linked to the origins of divination) – a Chinese general pays close attention to the least indications-premonitions of change. This implies a fundamental difference in the status of the invisible in Greece and in China. What is invisible in a Greek model-form belongs to the order of the intelligible, the “mind’s eye”, or theory. Meanwhile, the kind of invisible that interests the Chinese is that which is *not yet visible* in the undifferentiated basis of all, way upstream from any process.
3. On the Chinese side, everything seems to lead to praise for “facility”. On the European side, in contrast, the highest value is placed on difficulty, and the effects that are expected tend to be proportionate to the difficulty of the task undertaken. In the logic that everything is in transition and unfolding, the best strategy is to tackle the situation at the stage when it is easy and then allow it to carry you along, through the deployment of its implied logic, to the stage of difficulty. The sage/general envisages and “plans” the difficulty “at the stages of facility,” we are told, just as he accomplishes great things at the stage when they are still infinitesimal. Thus, the difficult things that need to be done in the world must be undertaken at the stage of facility, just as great things in the world must be undertaken at the stage when they are still infinitesimal. For the sage expects effects to come from what is infinitesimal. Instead of confronting difficulty directly, he approaches the situation by placing himself at the point of the beginning of the evolution that will carry it in the desired direction. Similarly, instead of immediately undertaking great exploits, he starts off by making a minimal intervention that passes unnoticed but that, through the conditions it generates of its own accord, makes it possible to achieve the greatest of results later on. In short, he “does” nothing, commits himself to nothing unless the situation that he is approaching is prepared for it. The *Laozi* points out that whatever is stable and at rest is easy to hold and whatever is fragile is easy to break. This means that, to start taking things in hand, one must first attain that stability; and to think of breaking anything, one has to wait until that fragility



comes about. The whole art lies in an ability to predispose (the enemy or the world: for example, predispose the former to listen or to be defeated, and so on). Thus, the sage/general is only seen to intervene when it is a matter of responding to the way that things are inclining to go, so he never “does” anything “difficult”; and given that he is content to start processes off discreetly and then leave them to develop on their own, nor does he ever do anything “great.” But by those very means he is able to accomplish what, in the end, will turn out to be great.

4. If one uses men in accordance with the potential of the situation, it is easy; whereas whatever one demands of them by resorting to force is difficult. If one can but obtain that potential, victory comes by itself, there is no longer any need to demand anything “special”. However heavy the logs or boulders, thanks to the slope it is easy to move them, whereas it is difficult to shift them by force. The same argument is equally valid for the theorists of despotism: it is easy to exact obedience if one relies on the potential of one’s position but difficult if one has to count on merit or goodwill
5. Moreover, action from the outside always intervenes at one particular moment and not at another, applying force in one particular spot and not in any other. It is always local and momentary (even if it lasts for ten years, as the Trojan War did). It is always a “one-off.” Because it is arbitrary and isolated, such an action stands out in the course of things; it attracts noise. By forcing things, it also forces attention. Furthermore, because action is personal and relates directly to a particular (even if collective) subject, it is easy to spot. It constitutes an event, suggesting a meaning, becomes the basis of a story. The interconnections that it picks out from the unfolding becomes the basis of a story. It focuses attention, crystallizes interest. All action is naïve. *So, to confirm his control over the world or to acquire some sway over it, a sage never takes action* (in this respect, his role is like that of a general). Instead, he “transforms”. For, in contrast to action that, even if it is prolonged, is necessarily momentary, the duration of transformation is extended; and it is this continuity that produces effects. Chinese thought constantly returns to this theme. *However imperceptible the starting point, by slowly accentuating its propensity, one can end up with the most decisive results. Chinese thought is particularly sensitive to the way in which any process that is not interrupted is inclined, on that very account, to “deploy” itself, to “thicken” and become “more dense” and, through this regular development to take on more and more consistency. Eventually, this becomes “evident” to us, without ever ceasing to be totally natural.* As one Chinese saying neatly puts it, “it becomes manifest without ever having to show itself.” The result is increasingly perceptible, even becomes patently clear, but that is precisely what it is: simply a result that has never attracted our attention and does not need to be pointed out.
6. The transformation of oneself and the transformation of others are both progressive processes, and the one follows from the other: it is because that “inner authenticity” is ever unfailing that it eventually comes to “inform” a person’s entire behavior; next it becomes externally “transparent” and then so completely “manifest” that, as objectivization becomes more intense, it acts so forcefully on those who surround him that the sage, without ever intending to, ends up by “shaking” and “transforming” them all. The process leading to the manifestation



of the inner principle through its eventual outer effects is regular and continuous. Because he does not betray the confidence that others place in him and continues never to betray it, that confidence in him grows increasingly solid and increasingly deep anchored. *Because it is never shattered, it develops, becomes a part of reality, causing no surprise, never in question. Eventually the sage has no need to “make any move in order to be respected,” no need to “speak in order to be believed,” no need to “recompense people in order to encourage them” or to “become angry in order to be feared”. In short, he need make no “move” (to one side or another, either of which is always relatively arbitrary) in order to modify reality. In other words – and this is a most striking way of putting it – he need not “act” in order to make things “happen”. Change thus occurs of its own accord, in consequence of the continuation of the process, with no need for anyone to exert pressure on the situation or to expend any effort. Reality is inclined, not forced, in a particular direction and thus prompts no resistance. Do not impose effects but allow them to impose themselves.*

7. Transformation is without “locale”. Not only is it not local, as action is, but it is impossible to localize; its deployment is always global. In consequence, its effects are diffuse, all-pervading, never limited. Because it is continuous and progressive and operates everywhere at once, transformation normally passes unnoticed. Since it is not attributable (to any individual’s will) and not localizable (to a particular place or moment), it is not possible to isolate, not demarcated, and so escapes notice. In contrast to action, which is always spectacular, even dramatically so, its effects dissolve within the situation. Time and again it is said of the sage that, under his influence, the people day by day evolve toward the good without realizing who is making this happen.

2. Western Efficacy

1. Goal → Ideal → Will: This is a means-end relationship. Once an end is ideally conceived, we set about finding the means whereby that end can be made to enter the realm of fact (fully accepting the presumable element of intrusion, however arbitrary and forced). Or, to put it the other way around, what we understand by a plan, in the sense of a plan of action, is an elaborated project involving a sequence of operations that constitute means designed to attain a particular goal
2. With our eyes fixed on the model that we have conceived, which we project on the world and on which we base a plan to be executed, we choose to intervene in the world and give a form to reality. And the closer we stick to that ideal form in the action that we take, the better our chances of succeeding. Each projects upon the world an ideal plan that will then have to be incorporated into factual reality. But what does “incorporate” mean here, given that they are already operating *in reality*? First, they conceive of working “for the best”; next, they draw on their “willpower” in order to impose their models upon reality. To impose is to superimpose, as if imprinting on a new surface and using force to do so. Our inclination is to extend to everything this model-making, the principle of which was developed by science, for, as is well known, science (European science, or at least classic science) is itself a simply a vast operation of model-making, the technique or practical application of which materially transforms the world, thereby testifying to its efficacy. The question that therefore arises is whether



what works so well from a technical point of view, by enabling us to control nature, works just as well for managing human situations and relations. This type of ideal scenario rarely works out as the world is never altogether receptive to the order that we wish it to have; inevitably, there is always a discrepancy between the planned model for our action and what we, *with our eyes fixed* on that model, manage to achieve. In short, practice always to some degree falls short of theory. The model remains out there on the horizon on which we fix our gaze. The ideal, up in the sky, is inaccessible.

3. For an action to be “good” it is not enough for it to be well intentioned: it must also be successful: and in view of the indeterminacy of things, that *realization* cannot eliminate all perils and risks
 4. Theory and practice are totally coupled in this line of thought but prudence fills the gap. Prudence functions alongside science, drawing on a different part of the rational soul. It is designed to take charge of the need for action within a constantly changing world; it calculates and deliberates the best thing to do. In this, it is complemented not only by an accurate eye but also by an alert mind or good judgment. Whereas cleverness is an ability to combine the most efficacious means, regardless of the quality of the end, prudence, for its part, is concerned about the end. Prudence, an ethical take on cleverness, is always directed toward the good; and pure “cleverness” is set aside.
 5. If one begins to rely too much on method, a mechanical sort of aptitude takes over and becomes increasingly inappropriate as one progresses from the level of tactics to that of strategy. *When it becomes formulaic, it becomes stale and dated and people stop thinking and simply follow rules.* The essence of warfare is to betray its model. In short, to think about warfare is to think about the extent to which it is bound to betray the ideal concept of it. Clausewitz forged a concept to explain why the ideal model intended as a guide for action fails: namely, friction. He suggested that this concept was sufficiently general to make it possible to distinguish between real warfare and the kinds one reads about in books, because it is generally true that in warfare everything takes place at a lower level because of all the countless secondary contingencies that can never be closely examined on paper and as a result of which one always falls short of the theoretical goal. In warfare, everything is simple (in the initial plan), but the simplest of things proves difficult (in practice). Clausewitz tells us that this difficulty can be compared to that which we experience as soon as we try to execute a movement as natural as walking in the water...what distinguishes warfare in practice from the ease with which it may be planned is an overall difference – a difference of “climate” or “atmosphere,” as it were: it would be illusory to think of reducing it by resorting to yet more theory. *Only by adapting through experience, in other words, through practice, can one hope to improve the situation*
 6. Tactics = form, strategy = significance
 7. Behind the myth of ‘action’ lies that of inspiration
3. Eastern Efficacy
1. Chinese thought is a way out of our rut, for it never constructed a world of ideal forms, archetypes, or pure essences that are separate from reality but inform it. It regards the whole of reality as a regulated and continuous process that stems



purely from the interaction of the factors at play (which are at once opposed and complementary: the famous *yin* and *yang*). Order is not perceived as coming from a model that one can fix one's eyes on and apply to things. Instead, it is entirely contained within the course of reality, which it directs in an immanent fashion, ensuring its *viability* (hence the omnipresence in Chinese thought of the theme of "the way", the *Dao*). Setting out to illuminate the progress of things, by elucidating its internal coherence and in order to act in accordance with it, the Chinese sage never conceived of a contemplative activity that was pure knowledge, possessing an end in itself, or that itself represented the supreme end (happiness) and was altogether disinterested. For him, the "world" was not an object of speculation; it was not a matter of knowledge" on the one hand and "action" on the other. That is why Chinese thought, logically enough, disregarded the theory-practice relationship: not through ignorance or because it was childish, but simply because it *sidestepped* the concept – just as it sidestepped the notion of Being and thought about God. From this difference that we have discovered, we could deduce an alternative way of behaving. Instead of constructing an ideal form that we then project onto things, we could try to detect the factors whose configuration is favorable to the task at hand; instead of setting up a goal for our actions, we could allow ourselves to be carried along by the propensity of things. In short, instead of imposing our plan upon the world, we could rely on the potential inherent in the situation. Here *wisdom and strategy come together: rather than depend on our tools, we should rely on the way that a process unfolds in order to attain the hoped-for result; rather than think of drawing up plans, we should learn to make the most of what is implied by the situation and whatever promise is held out by its evolution. Two notions thus lie at the heart of ancient Chinese strategy, forming a pair: on the one hand, the notion of a situation or configuration, as it develops and takes shape before our eyes; on the other hand, and counterbalancing this, the notion of potential, which is implied by the situation and can be made to play in one's favor.* On the European side, the only equivalent to this idea of a potential that I can think of is the example provided by mechanics: what it calls "the potential energy of the situation" (in physical terms rather than moral, as used in a scientific theorem that is applicable to the production of kinetic energy, not as a rule to guide human behavior). "A man who relies on the potential contained within the situation uses his men in battle in the same way one gets logs or stones to roll. It is in the nature of logs and stones to remain immobile on a level surface and to enter into movement on sloping ground; if they are square, they stop; if they are round, they roll. The potential of troops that one knows how to use in battle is comparable to that of round stones that tumble down a mountain, rolling over and over." The slope here serves as an image of the *propensity* that results from the relations of force that the general knows how to exploit to his advantage, by maneuvering his men. The commentators insist that the effect happens *sponte sua* (of its own accord) and is irresistible. Because the slope is part of the configuration (which includes both the relief of the terrain and the roundness of the stones), the result is "easy". But this potential energy within the situation should not be limited to the terrain of



military operations, it can also be used in three interconnected aspects: moral potential, topographical potential, potential through adaptation

1. *Set up environment to get people to “roll” effortlessly, turning potential energy into kinetic energy – positively “springload” every situation*
2. *Metis* is characterized in particular by the fact that, through some more or less fundamental maneuver and by making the most of circumstances, it is possible to win out over brute strength. As the world is always shifting, multiple, and ambivalent, this kind of intelligence is infinitely adaptable and nimble; it is said to be “lithe” and “multicolored.” It remains open to all possibilities and itself changes constantly in order to adapt to circumstances. There are no hard and fast rules to succeed
3. According to ancient treatises, the key to Chinese strategy is to rely on the inherent potential of the situation and to be carried along by it as it evolves. Right from the start, this rules out any idea of predetermining the course of events in accordance with a more or less definitive plan worked out in advance as an ideal to be realized. A Chinese general, for his part, is careful not to impose upon the course of events any notion of his own of how things ought to be, since it is from the very evolution of the situation, which follows the course that is logically bound to take, that he intends to profit. *The general must start by making a painstaking study of the forces present. This will enable him to assess which factors are favorable to each of the two camps, for these are the factors from which victory will stem. This evaluation must be conducted based on five criteria: morale, meteorological conditions (the “heavens”), topographical conditions (the “earth”), those in command, and the system of organization – and it should pose a definite set of questions. The expert of strategy then concludes: on the basis of the above, I know who will prevail and who will be defeated.* From this antagonistic situation, as evaluated by that series of questions, by viewing it from every possible angle, he will discover a particular potential and will only need to exploit it. This passage, moving from an assessment of the forces in confrontation to the potential that can be deduced from that assessment, is of central importance. Hence, the definition that follows: that *potential consists in “determining the circumstances with a view to profiting from them.” Understood in this fashion, circumstances are no longer something unpredictable that will turn out in a particular way, always threatening to ruin any plan imposed upon them. Instead, thanks precisely to their variability, circumstances can progressively be turned to advantage by the propensity emanating from a logic of model-making and also from the task of producing an embodiment, and one accedes to a logic of unfolding. It is through those very circumstances that potential is released, the potential, precisely, of the situation. Conclusion: potential is circumstantial – it only exists thanks to the circumstances and vice-versa (so it is the potentiality of the circumstances that one needs to exploit). One moves from an evaluation of the factor to the possibility of exploiting them*
4. One should constantly keep the enemy guessing, but also always adapt to him
5. *Strategy cannot be determined in advance, and it is only on the basis of the potential of the situation that it takes shape. Warfare should be understood as something that lives and reacts, it entails a constant state of reciprocal action.*



Strategy cannot be determined in advance as it proceeds from continuous adaptation. In short, Chinese efficacy does not have to cope with “friction”, since whereas friction is a threat to any plan drawn up in advance, adventitious circumstances themselves are precisely what make it possible for the implied potential to come about and deploy itself – *no more friction, chance, or genius*

6. This ancient treatise on diplomacy is bent on analyzing in detail how, by constantly adapting yourself to another person and by never alienating him and so never causing him to doubt or resist you, you gradually increase your power over him and so can manipulate him as you will. *By remaining ever flexible, always going along with the situation, never forcing it or even countering it, you make yourself available to the situation, never predetermining anything yourself or expending any energy.*
7. *In short, the effect results from your position, not from yourself – the slope of obedience.* The situation is such that it cannot be otherwise; without seeking it, the result is obtained
8. The art of government lies in making others compete in the maintenance of one’s own position. His rule does not require any physical presence that is inevitably of a local and limited nature. It is simply a matter of issuing orders. This makes it possible to exercise power fully without expending great efforts. *The perfect despot does not need to be present, has no need for action.*
9. A good general intervenes upstream in the process. He has already identified the factors favorable to him “before they have actually developed” and in this way has got the situation to evolve in the direction that suits him. When the accumulated potential reveals itself to be completely in his favor, he engages resolutely in battle, and his success is assured. Troops who seek victory only when they begin to fight are defeated in advance. For, as will by now be clear, the battle itself is merely a result. Its outcome is simply a clear manifestation of the propensity already implicit in the situation even before the battle began. *It is because he relies on that propensity that the victor is already decided even before battle commences.*
10. The less one can conceal, the more docile one must be. An all-seeing eye has a paralyzing effect.
11. Where Western warfare aimed to destroy the enemy, the Chinese preferred to keep it intact. The way to conquer the world is always to keep it intact, nothing could be more economical. *The Chinese declare specifically that the ideal in warfare is to attack the enemy in his strategy, then in his alliances, next in his troops, and lastly in his places*
12. *Space between action is not dead but can be used to mature and transform*
13. To plot efficacious action, the remaining coordination to be taken into consideration is that of timing. *For an opportunity arises when action and the right time coincide so that suddenly that moment becomes a chance, the time is propitious and seems to come to meet us, and occurs.* The time is favorable, leading into a safe harbor: it is “opportune”, but it is also fleeting. It is a minimal as well as an optimal time, hardly perceptible between a *not yet* and a *no longer*, a time that must be “grabbed” in order to achieve success. The sciences are concerned with what is eternal (that which is always identical and can be



demonstrated: always the ideal in mathematics). *In contrast, what is useful is eminently variable*, as Aristotle recognizes: for something may be “useful today but not tomorrow.” With a view to what is necessary, one should therefore determine both the means to adopt and *when to do so*. For since “the good” varies according to the relevant category, once belief in a general Good is discarded, in the category of time an opportunity becomes “the good”, that is to say, “the time that is the right time.”

14. The moment of activation must not be delayed: *the right moment to attack is determined by the potential of the situation*. This conveys a different concept of “opportunity.” Here it is seen not as a fleeting chance resulting from a favorable conjunction of circumstances that prompts action and favors its success, but as the most suitable moment to intervene in the course of a process that has already begun (so that, such is the pressure leading up to it, in the last analysis it is not really a matter of an intervention), the moment that sees the culmination of all the potentiality gradually acquired and that makes it possible to derive the greatest efficacy from it. *As such, opportunity is the end of a process*
15. What we have here, in fact, are two crucial moments, not just one (one at the beginning, the other at the end of the transformation): the moment at the end, when one at last falls upon the enemy with such intensity that the latter is immediately defeated: and the moment at the beginning, which was the point of the appearance of a cleavage that caused the potential gradually to shift to one side rather than the other.
16. The sage’s wisdom and military strategy are in exact agreement. For whether it be a matter of the sage inwardly conforming with morality or of the general deploying efficacy in the outside world, both are led to scrutinize the starting point of a tendency – in fact, that is the very first of their concerns. *As soon as a tendency, however slight, begins to develop it is bound to modify the situation. So the sage watches for the slightest signs of an inner deviation, for, unless he corrects it immediately, it will lead him farther and farther from the correct way.* Likewise, the general watches for signs of the slightest probably propensity becoming established in the external world, for, as soon as he has detected it, he can depend upon it until its full development is reached. At the moment of inception, nothing is as yet detectable, but already an orientation is engaged
17. *Chinese strategy does not require heroism – simply adapt and transform so a single result is inevitable*
18. Two logics stand in opposition here: on the one hand, a logic of activism, which involves an endless expenditure and accumulation of “more and more”, constantly learning more and more and seeking to go farther and farther; on the other, quite the reverse, a logic according to which one constantly cuts back on one’s involvement and reduces one’s activity. It is in the light of this opposition that we should understand the initial formula: *reduce more and more, right down to the stage of nonaction: do nothing, and there is no longer anything that is left undone*. We thus come back to the difference mentioned earlier. If one restrains oneself from taking action, it is so as to allow things to happen and to allow the world to “change” of its own accord: an *implicit transformation* takes the place of *direct action*. This rejection of planned action is a valuable ploy, particularly in



politics. The more rules and prescriptions proliferate, the worse the state of the world becomes, precisely because they constitute an exacerbated expression of political “doing.” The more prohibitions, the more impoverished a country becomes, the more laws, the more bandits proliferate

19. You do not take action (to implement a predetermined plan, in exceptional circumstances, in order to force an issue), yet nor are you inactive, since you unflinchingly go along with reality as it unfolds (keeping in step with it, partnering it). Once the world is no longer an *object* to act upon, you become an integral part in its becoming: *you act, but now you do not clash with it*. This pure action (“pure” in the sense that love is sometimes said to be “pure”) is action that no longer involves any expenditure of effort or any friction: it is action without activity. *Having shed all aspects of discontinuity and rigidity, it turns into evolution that is endless, just as tasting can be endless*. As such parallel formulations indicate, one can “act without acting” just as one can “taste a non-taste” or be “busy without busying oneself”. For just as nontaste constitutes the latent basis of the most diverse savors (and contains them all in a virtual state), a sage acts upon the very root of becoming, positioning himself upstream from its full deployment. *Acting, like tasting, can then extend of its own accord, excluding nothing; it is “inexhaustible.”*
20. *The world cannot be codified which is why, to use it, one must always conform to it*
 1. *“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the one most adaptable to change. – Darwin*
21. 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. Every individual now fulfills his function as naturally as cat serves to catch mice. The sage therefore no longer needs to busy himself at all. It is enough that he keep a tight hold on the mechanism for everyone, from all four corners of the world, to come and offer him support. He can simply “wait” for this to be forthcoming and for all and sundry to devote themselves to his well-being
22. The system is constantly renewable: the machine continues to operate in this way without ever coming to a halt; it functions in a “coherent” and regular way. An overall efficiency is thus achieved. *The ruler is all the more powerful because he never needs to intervene*: in fact, “at the top as at the bottom,” at the level of the people as at that of the ruler, no more action is needed. *With each individual copying his or her assigned place, everything runs smoothly of its own accord. Once set in motion, the wheels turn automatically*. It is in this sense that the power that is exercised is described as “void” (void and without action and he waits for others to deploy their activity on his behalf). “void” means that the ruler *allows* the mechanism of power that he holds in his grasp to function, never interfering, never making any personal contribution. It remains *purely* mechanical. *He is careful never to manifest or even feel the slightest preference, for the arbitrary nature of such subjectivity would impede the impeccable functioning of the system. He is also careful never to bring his intelligence to bear on it, for introducing an element of interplay would inevitably confuse the*



system's rigorous self-sufficiency, which stems from its coherence. It would, moreover, lead others to compete with him in intelligence, thereby pulling him down to their level and setting up a competition for power (which would ruin its efficient functioning). Such a perfect despot is wary of all interventionism, for to recommend a particular line of behavior is to impose a momentary and partial order on the overall order definitively established by the system. Any interference on the ruler's part would introduce intentionality into a system that is supposed to work automatically, that is to say, purely as is necessary. Above all, so as never to upset this immanent order, which, because it is immanent, is self-sufficient, a good despotic ruler must guard against the temptations of virtue. If he were to manifest clemency or generosity, he would call into question the regularity of rewards and punishments. That is why his role is described as "void" and also why the very best of sovereigns is "never noticed." Speaking of the despot, the theorist of authoritarianism repeats what the Daoist sage said: all that is necessary that it is known that up there, he exists.

23. It is impossible to make an ear of grain grow in the winter. *But as soon as the conditions are correctly adjusted, the result comes about purely through immanence – without any need to strive, exhort, apply pressure, or push.* Just as water flows and boats float, a despotic ruler preserves the natural way and so is endlessly obeyed. That is why he can be called an "enlightened" sovereign. All he needs to do is to allow effects to come about
24. One expression that is used encapsulates the nature of strategy in the neatest fashion: *the particular skill of a strategist lies in "spotting a propensity" in such a way that "he has no need to strive".* Able, as he is, to see at the earliest stage how interdependence is working, he relies on a tendency that emanates from this and has no more need to "strive". Let us now see, concretely, how to operate, or rather how to let things operate to avoid having to take action in order to succeed. *The Laozi declares that if you decide to push yourself forward in order to be successful, this will be both exhausting and risky. You will inevitably arouse rivalry and will have to confront rivals and struggle against them. Whereas, if you stay modestly in the background, it may well happen (of its own accord) that you will be pushed to the fore. The withdrawn position in which you choose to place yourself leads to a reversal: so, rather than push yourself forward, you should act in such a way that others do the pushing for you. If others push you forward, they will not alter challenge your advancement. Because it will correspond to what the situation calls for, it will become naturally integrated with that situation. Your reticence will, in advance, have disarmed mistrust and hostility, so others will feel no jealousy toward you but will be attracted by your withdrawal and will come, of their own accord, to seek you out.* Instead of seeking to impose yourself fully by trying (by dint of action) to saturate the situation, you benefit from an effect of hollowness that makes the tension converge and that may result in a promotion. *The last shall be first*, as we also say in the West, but in this case it is not a matter of a reward. Instead, it happens in the immediate present, purely through immanence (which stems from the situation). Furthermore, this choice of withdrawal does not express any self-denial. If one prefers to remain in the background, the *Laozi* tells us, it is in order to bring about one's own personal



interests (and, similarly, if one treats the “self” as something “external,” it is the better to make it exist). It is purely a matter of efficacy. *So we should not count on “calling forth” an effect but should simply allow it to come about. We should not seek the effect ourselves but should place ourselves in the right position to welcome it. An effect is something that one harvests. So the most promising position to be in is a lowly one, where our abilities are not solicited and so can remain “constant” and “not abandon us”.* An image of this ability to allow effects to converge upon us is provided by the sea receiving water from the rivers. The way that large rivers and the sea can reign over all the other water courses is through their ability to position themselves below them: the sea allows rivers to flow toward it, following their downward course, and dominates from below. In the same way, a sage dominates the ordinary people by placing himself “below them, through his words” (even the emperor might refer to himself as “I, the humble one,” or “the lonely one”). Then, when he discovers himself to be above people, the latter do not find him “heavy” to carry and are “happy to push him forward” – in fact, they never tire of doing so. Conversely, a sage can effortlessly use the energy of others. This humility (literally, the choice to put oneself below) is neither moral nor psychological. It is purely strategic. The *Laozi* then proceeds to develop this theme at the level of diplomacy: instead of imposing its hegemony, which would inevitably be challenged, a great country, by its own choice, places itself “downstream” so as to allow smaller countries to “flow” toward it: in this way it gains its “ascendancy”. The *Laozi* also formulates it as: whoever draws attention to himself is not well regarded. In other words, whoever attempts to obtain what he wants directly blocks the possibility of achieving this. This is not because he is impatient (seeking to achieve his determined goal too quickly), but because he is fundamentally mistaken about the way in which reality is realized. *For something to be realized in an effective fashion, it must come about as an effect. It is always through a process (which transforms the situation), not through a goal that leads (directly) to action, that one achieves an effect, a result. So one is mistaken if one thinks it possible to obtain it by force, by grabbing it instead of following the way, the Dao, which allows an effect, which is progressively implied by a situation, to come about of its own accord. That is how it is that “by not drawing attention to oneself, one can be well regarded” (by not approving of oneself, one can gain recognition).* All this is borne out by moral experience: whoever lays claim to greatness possesses only a false greatness; his greatness is pretentious and will irremediably remain petty. In contrast, because, to the very end, he never seeks to be great, the sage is in a position to have his greatness come about and is truly great. Any strategy thus seems, in the end, to come down to simply knowing how to *implicate an effect, knowing how to tackle a situation upstream in such a way that the effect flows “naturally” from it. By pushing this logic as far as it will go, we arrive at the following conclusion: a fine strategist is a person who knows how to cope with a lack at the center of a situation (a condition that is lacking) in such a way that a compensatory effect, operating in his favor, then must inevitably result.*

25. If you want something to be folded up, you must first unfold it. If you want something to be weakened, you must first strengthen it, if you want something to



be eliminated, you must first promote it; if you want it to be withdrawn, you must first grant it. If you want to get rid of a despot, let him follow his own inclinations and sink into the extremes of tyranny, for then he will provoke his own downfall all by himself and far better than if you set out to punish him

26. Generosity and humility bring their own reward because they imply a necessary compensation. It is by reacting to effectiveness that such an attitude wins over others; *effectiveness can win over the whole world*. It is possible to use reality's logic of compensation deliberately in order to make a situation react as one wishes it to. To this end, all one needs to do is "set out walking against the current" of the result that one hopes to arrive at (for example, as we have seen, one withdraws, backing away, in order to be swept forward, one takes up a lower position in order to rise). Thus, before one even enters, one has an eye on the exit, and, without anyone else noticing a thing, one garners all the profits for oneself. *Basically, for our most selfish ends to result as effects, we need no longer bring our will to bear on things by exerting pressure. All we need do is implant those ends in the trajectory of things. In this way, left to its immanence, the desired effect is realized.*

4. Transformation

1. The Chinese never chose to interpret reality in terms of action, rather they interpret reality as a continuous transformation – *effective efficacy through adaptation*
2. *Efficacy is all the better the more discrete it is*. A sage transforms the world through whatever he allows to emanate from his personality, day by day, which then passes from one person to another with no need for any justification or to be held up as an example. *In similar fashion, a good general needs no praise – either for his foresight or for his courage. We westerners may find that surprising but the affirmation is categorical: no one would ever dream of erecting a statue of the best of generals. For he will have gotten the situation to evolve in the desired direction so successfully, gradually intervening well in advance, that he will have made the victory seem so "easy" that it does not occur to anyone to praise him for it*. Once the engagement has taken place, people will say, "Victory was a foregone conclusion," thereby reducing the merit of the commander. Yet, without realizing it, they will have paid him the greatest of all compliments. It is because his merit is so complete that the victory seems natural and therefore attracts no notice. Here again, what seems to be paradoxical in truth proves the point: *in the old days those who were skilled at warfare only won easy victories. That was because they did not engage in combat until, by getting the situation to evolve to their advantage, they had ensured that victory would be "easy" and so were certain of winning that day. It is not hard to see why China produced no epic – nothing to recount*
3. The Chinese think of human efficacy as a natural transformation. A general made the situation evolve to his advantage in the same way as nature makes a plant grow or a river continuously hollows out its bed. As in such natural modifications, the transformation that he brings about is both diffuse and discrete, imperceptible as it operates but manifests in its effects. *The Chinese believe not so much in the transcendence of action, but rather in the immanence of transformation*. We do not notice ourselves aging or the river hollowing out its bed. Yet the reality of the



landscape and of life stems from that imperceptible evolution. There is one particular image that manages to convey this diffuse efficacy of transformation: the image of the wind. One does not see the wind passing as it constantly insinuates itself everywhere, but as it passes, the grasses are flattened.

5. Facility

1. The title of the class *Book of Changes*, which is the fundamental book of Chinese thought, could equally be translated as *The Book of Facility* as “yi” means both “to change” and “easy”. This suggests that change always comes about in reality by following the line of least resistance (as water does), where it is easiest to move forward
2. The master of wisdom of ancient China on the contrary teach us to make use of reality with cunning – not so much to deal with others with cunning, which we Westerners have always regarded as the acme of cleverness, but rather to deal with the situation with cunning, relying on the logic of its unfolding. The point is at once to allow the situation’s effect to come about, without having to make any effort or expend any energy, and also to prevent any rejection on its part, in other words to get it (the situation) to tolerate us. The latter is a condition of the former, and in the *Laozi* the two go together and are apprehended jointly as complying with three main criteria: *an effect must not be forced, one must not try to take it over, and one must avoid saturating it. The commonplace: excess. Excess should be avoided as excessive effect is counterproductive.* It is therefore essential that the effect carry no supercharge imparted by whoever produces it. That person must be careful not to add any personal or affective element to its pure effectiveness: *he must not dare to use it to increase his own standing but must be content purely with the effect, without showing that he is “proud” of it, without using it to “improve his own reputation” or boasting about it. The “fruit”, or end result, is sufficient. The effect must appear to result purely from the situation and to merge with its coherence. It must be accepted by all as being ineluctable – as if it was bound to happen and was in no way imposed. No show of force must be added to emphasize the effect.* For any hint of force renders the effect dependent on the reversals that any recourse to force invariably invites. Furthermore, the effect then becomes subject to the ineluctable wear and tear that the application of force inevitably implies. In short, any such reinforcement of an effect tempers it. It weakens it by contamination, since force is merely the other side to weakness and always provokes it on the rebound. By inclining to the side of force, an effect becomes caught in a force-weakness tension in which it may well swing to the opposite side. The imposition of force thus renders the effect precarious. *Since any manifestation of force is bound to be temporary, any effect that depends on force will soon be exhausted; it is condemned to ephemerality. The fact is that anything that emphasizes an effect is parasitic upon it, puts a strain on it, and inhibits it. Too much turns into too little, for excess not only acts as a dead weight, not only threatens to reverse or exhaust the effect, but furthermore impedes what might have happened – one might even say what was just waiting to happen. The effect is quite simply prevented from resulting.* A double price is then paid: internally, that surplus effectiveness undermines the effect, creating an obstruction: meanwhile, externally it causes the effect to be “detested.” For,



instead of passing unnoticed, the excessiveness of the effect draws attention to it, provokes resentment, and attracts resistance, causing it to be rejected. The *Laozi*'s prescriptions go even further: "When the effect come about, do not dwell on it". A sage/general is not proprietary, claims no credit for an effect. As soon as one claims credit for an effect, one engages in a logic of appropriation that is bound to be counterproductive, given that anything that is "occupied" is destined to eventually be "abandoned", so that appropriation rebounds against the effect, causing it to be challenged. To occupy an effect implies that by taking up such a proprietary position one trespasses on the position of others, and, as a result of that rivalry, the effect is compromised; its duration is jeopardized. If you but refrain from "occupying the effect," it will, on the contrary, "not abandon you." Instead of rendering it precarious by binding it to your own person, you allow it to belong to the world that brought it into existence; you restore it to its immanence. Elsewhere, another formula captures that strategic discretion admirably: "Let the effect result while you withdraw yourself." *It precisely conveys two points at once: first, that an effect "follows on" as a result – that it is a consequence, not a planned project – second, that instead of presenting oneself as the author of the effect and deriving prestige from this, one should step aside to allow free play to the factors that sweep the effect forward.* Once again, all this is a far cry from heroism. An effect must not be constrained or forced; one must not seek to draw attention to it; one must refrain from laying claim to it and from expecting glory from it. Above all the effect should be allowed to merge with the evolution of things and be absorbed by it. Once discretely absorbed by reality, it too becomes real. The purpose of this rejection of any deliberate, activist attempt to intensify and draw attention to an effect is explained by the very nature of an effect; it is only effective if it proves naturally inclined to deploy itself, to work away and *become* effective. That is why, in the last analysis, true efficacy *seems deficient*. As the *Laozi* remarks, "*A great work puts off completion*". *In other words, if it is to make an impact, true efficacy seems the reverse of a completed effect; it never quite achieves its result.* "Full achievement is never quite attained, so is never used up," "total plenitude is as it were empty, so it is never exhausted by being used". Through the hollowness of the valley, the "spirit" passes, thanks to the emptiness that always remains to be filled. It is the same with efficacy: instead of imposing itself fully, thanks to the emptiness that it contains, it can exercise its full effect.

3. Instead of daring to act, the thing to do is to help the spontaneous development of all the existing elements, in other words, to *assist whatever happens naturally*. This formula, which borders on or even slips into a contradiction, suggests a possible meaning that, as it is further developed, produces a steady stream of corroborative evidence: "evidence" in such quantity, in fact, that it is hard to take it in without first contracting it. As the process in question comes about naturally, we must avoid intervening by daring to act for that might impede the spontaneity that is at work. But at the same time, it is important to as to assist that natural propensity by encouraging its impetus. In contrast to action (that is direct, willed, with the aim of achieving a goal), acting-without-action has an indirect efficacy. It stems from conditioning and is realized by transformation. The model (or at least



the favorite example) for this is provided by the growth of plants (we should remember that the Chinese are agriculturalists, not herdsmen). As the *Mencius* points out, one must neither pull on plants to hasten their growth (an image of direct action), nor must one fail to hoe the earth around them so as to encourage their growth (by creating favorable conditions for it). You cannot force a plant to grow, but neither should you neglect it. What you should do is liberate it from whatever might impede its development. You must *allow it to grow*. Such tactics are equally effective at the level of politics. Even if the doing becomes minimal, so discrete as to be hardly discernible, *allowing* things to happen constitutes involvement. Meanwhile, this discretion makes the “doing” very hard to apprehend. However much one conceives of it as contrast that sets up an opposition between that which is “organized” (by others) and that which “constantly comes about of its own accord”), which happens constantly of its own accords is, in itself, hardly detectable. Once action, by liberating itself from all activism, comes to merge with the spontaneous course of things, it is no longer detectable. Given that it is diffused as the course of things evolves, there is nothing about it on which to focus or that catches the eye. It adapted itself at such an early stage to the principle of the spontaneous course of things that is no longer distinguishable from it. This acting-without-action presents no sharp edges. The frontier between doing and what is done is effaced. *It is impossible to trace the effect back to anyone or anything. Anyone involved could in good faith claim to be its source. When, thanks to the prince’s acting-without-action, “the effect comes about and gives rise to a particular situation,” all concerned declare, “it just happened”*. Thus, all that is known of a really good ruler is that he exists (“there really is someone up there...”). As we by now understand, his merit is all the greater the less it is perceived (not because he makes any attempt to hide it, out of humility, but because others simply have no way of perceiving it). That is how it is that, when efficacy becomes naturally, one can “hardly” tell it is so, or rather it is its “hardly” perceptible nature that testifies most strongly to it.

4. In the absence of metaphysical construction, the levels of the coming-to-be of reality culminate in the natural. That which is natural imitates nothing; there is nothing beyond it, nothing farther upstream. It is distinguished from everything else by the fact that it relates to nothing but itself.
5. The sage does not claim “to be humane” and to act well any more than the world does. For neither action nor the good is relevant here. If one is human towards others, one is led to focus one’s behavior on good actions that are individual and momentary, one soon falls into action that is spectacular but with scant effect. What is called “the good” is simply a norm (moral “rectitude”) projected onto the world, a norm that leads us to split the world in two, setting up an opposition within it (good-evil) and, in the last analysis, mutilating it. For to denigrate one side and set a high value on the other side is to fail to do injustice to their interdependence and to lose sight of their coherence. Virtue should therefore be understood in a different sense, one that relates not to how things ought to be, but rather to effectiveness: it is a quality that can engender a particular effect or that is capable of producing it (as one speaks of the curative virtue of a plant or the healing virtue of time or as in the expression “by virtue of...”). According to one



of the most classical of Chinese glosses and one can be applied to the *Laozi*, virtue is interpreted by the verb that means “to obtain,” a homonym that has become a synonym: “*virtue*” is *something that is efficient*.

6. In China, a sage is one who, by returning to the naturalness of processes, ensures that the world is rightfully his. This efficacy through immanence is a recurrent theme. When the evolution of a situation favors no particular development, there is nothing to be done but wait, and it is by “daring” not to take action that one can preserve oneself (which is essential whatever follows; indeed, for there to be any follow-on at all). (Note the Daoist attention paid to the all-important, primordial matter of *staying alive*.) But above all, when there is nothing favorable that can be done, it is by not doing anything at all, by taking care not to intervene, that, by not upsetting the regulation that is at work by your activism, you can best help it to achieve its fulfillment. Again we come back to the lesson best taught by Daoism: *namely, that it is not efficacious to intervene forcibly in any situation. To do so may constitute heroic – or at any rate spectacular – action, but it is pointless. It will come to naught.* A court adviser should first distinguish what is easy from what is difficult and only then determine his strategy: his activity diminishes as he follows the line of least resistance and is not impeded in doing so. The better he espouses the course of reality, the better that action of his is able to merge with reality and, by so doing, be effective, along with that reality. Where personal relations and interest are concerned, what nonaction means here is that one exercises one’s authority simply by adapting to the situation, drawing on the serenity that gives one inner strength (in the Daoist mode), that is to say, by taking care not to project any ideas or intentions onto the situation or, as the treatise elegantly puts it, by keeping these “under wraps” rather than concentrating on them. There is one image in particular, that of a snake or, better still, a dragon, that successfully conveys the mobility of mind that makes it possible to allow things to evolve freely without the slightest difficulty or effort (*evolution* stands in opposition to action). The dragon’s flexible body has no fixed form; it weaves and bends in every direction, contracting in order to deploy itself, coiling up in order to progress. The general does not act, does not dissipate or expend his energies in any predetermined action but, instead, in the manner of the infinitely supple body of the dragon, makes the most of the ever-changing situation so as to advance continually along with it, *in a state of constant evolution*. Merge with the spontaneous course of things and respond to it “in a feminine manner,” as the *Laozi* recommends. This enables one to see strategic behavior in terms not of action, but of reaction. And that shift is enough to shift one’s overall perspective. Action is risky, for it means venturing into a new situation, and furthermore it is costly, for it demands an initial investment of initiative and energy. However, the acting-without-action involved in reacting is altogether different. Such reaction is not risky, since the situation has already been tested out and is already manifest; nor is it costly, since one is carried along on the back of whatever one’s opponent has already invested in the way of activity (rather than starting off by drawing on one’s own fund of initiative). Finally, whereas action is always marked by the arbitrary nature of its inaugural move and has to use some degree of force in order to infiltrate reality, reaction is, from the



start, always justified by whatever gives rise to it. Action is necessarily mediated (it must be prepared for by intention and motivated by will), whereas reaction can be immediate (it simply adheres to the action of one's opponent, with no further input of ideas or will). In other words, whereas action is transcendent to the world, being marked by certain externality (which obliges it to *impose* itself), and reaction immediately reabsorbs us in a logic of immanence, which we need only to espouse. Summing up, this treatise on diplomacy observes, reaction is not limited to any particular spot; it can take place at any point, at any moment. In a word, it cannot be "pinned down"; it is at one with the operational ubiquity of transformation.

7. The image of what constantly flows past our feet – water forever closely embracing every hollow in the terrain, conforming to its shape so as to move onward – is totally unexceptional, yet its repercussions at a theoretical level are endless. And the more unexceptional the image, the more needless its implications are. Chinese thought has always drawn inspiration from this image to find words for the hardest thing of all to express: the evident "facility" of that which is ceaselessly realized in an unremarkable and unnoticed fashion.
 8. Amazing willpower...European thought converged on all sides to set it up as an ability to confront the world and as the source of the subject's power to affirm himself and fulfill himself. It is even through our will that we most resemble God, thanks to the infinity that it reveals within us. In short, man's use of will is his way of being God. And then, just as European thought killed God, it also killed the will. Chinese thought no more expounded on will than it conceived of rights or liberty. In other words, it never tried to think through human personality by isolating and abstracting it from a situation in order to set it up as a subject of action. Instead of ultimately exalting human willpower, the ideal that Chinese thought advocates is to slip into the world so discretely that no one longer seems to make any intervention (nonaction) and to melt into its processivity in order to succeed.
 9. It is the polarity of the situation which determines everything. *The situation causes you to react in a certain manner.* The cowardice stems from the courage of another. In warfare, the polarity of the situation stems from the antagonism between the forces involved (which is why Chinese thought, which conceived of reality in terms of polarity, was predisposed to strategy). *Facility stems from the potential of the situation and why the sage/general only wins easy victories.*
6. Conception of Time
1. *An ability to foresee "opportunity" is certainly the most common requisite of strategy both in the West and in the in China. Rely not on what is likely (a construction) but on the tendency that has begun to develop. Seek out the slightest crack and if not there, know how to wait. Waiting is the corollary to foreseeing. The sage, through non-action, awaits until there is capacity*
 2. The difference between the Chinese and the European views with regard to the structure of opportunity thus seems to lie in their respective concepts of time. On the Greek side time, from the start, was seen in relation to the key opposition between theory and practice, so time inevitably came to be split into two: two opponents emerged, Chronos and Kairos, implacable enemies but both sons of



Aion, eternal Time. On the one hand, there is the time that is constructed by knowledge: regular, divisible, analyzable, and, consequently, controllable; on the other, there is the time that is open to action, which is constituted by an opportunity: chancy, chaotic, and, consequently, uncontrollable. Aristotle, already, defined this opportunity type of time, which stands in opposition to the other variety, in terms of its undirected, hesitant, and vacillating character. And, as is well known, modern thought has further accentuated its contingent nature or, rather, has radicalized it. However, the time of processes, as conceived, in China, is, strictly speaking, neither an object of knowledge nor an objective of action. It is neither time whose extension you are content to contemplate in a disinterested fashion, nor is it time in which you seek to intervene forcefully, through an eruption of will, in the hope of profiting from its disorder. Rather, it is an unfolding process with which you continuously try to keep in step and to each of whose stages you adapt. By dint of careful scrutiny, you identify the inception of the process and then you act as befits each stage as it evolves. This is not regular time like that of Greek science, docile time; nor is it accidental time that is wide open to action, rebellious time. Instead, it is *regulated* time: it maintains a balance in the course of transformation and remains coherent even as it continues to innovate. This is time that is oblivious to the distinction between theory and practice; it is neither the time of *chronos* nor that of *Kairos* (neither regularly periodic nor chancy). It never repeats itself, yet you can count on it. I think the best name for it is “strategic time.” It is because its unfolding is regulated that the general can foresee and wait (foresee the time ahead and wait for it to improve). He is at once a sage and a strategist: that is a common theme to which Chinese thought constantly returns and that it continues endlessly to elucidate. The logic behind it might be summed up as follows: the sage/general has made his conscious mind accessible to everything, because he has dissolved all the focal points to which ideal forms and plans inevitably lead, and he has freed it from the particular obsessions that, through a lack of flexibility, it is liable to foster. In this way, he has liberated it from both the partiality and the rigidity in which any individual point of view, once it has become exclusive, becomes trapped. In other words, finally to put the matter plainly, he has allowed his conscious mind to take in the entire globality of the processes, and he keeps it in a state that is as mobile and fluid – ever evolving – as the course of reality itself. The sage/general is thus in a position to identify with the overall coherence of becoming and can confidently anticipate future changes, as if – we are told – he experienced within himself the absence of any objective. *Because he knows that, seen from this overarching point of view, the renewal constantly affecting reality is never aberrant, he confidently expects the necessary balance to be restored between all reality’s adverse tensions, even before that renewal begins. Perhaps detection is the most appropriate term. By scrutinizing the present as closely as possible, he detects the presence of what it holds even before this becomes apparent.*

3. According to one well known saying in China, which the treatise repeats in this passage, the end is at the same time a beginning; the present is a continual transition (and the world a perpetual variation). So if I work back from the



unfolding that is taking place, I can “sense” in advance the unfolding that will result from it, and, in this way, I can control it.

4. *If you believe that efficacy stems not from action, but from transformation, you can rely on time to produce results.*
7. From Efficacy to Efficiency
 1. An effect is the full, saturated aspect of effectiveness, and, as such, it is too complete. Effectiveness, in contrast, is an effect that is still empty and so inclined to deploy itself. It is an effect in operation, in motion, and on that account is never completely manifest, as if lacking something yet inexhaustible.
 2. Unlike an effect (at which one aims through action involving a “means-leading-to-an-end”), effectiveness is not something that one seeks, steering toward it directly and deliberately. It needs to stem “naturally” from a process that is unfolding. *So strategy is always a matter of knowing how to impinge upon the process upstream, in such a way that an effect will then tend to “come” of its own accord.* Because this efficacy is by nature a consequence and so, to be realized, implies passing through a process that is its very precondition, it achieves the envisaged goal only in an indirect fashion. It resembles a fruit that, changing imperceptibly, eventually ripens; it is not a heroic gesture designed to seize something by force. For, as Mencius tells us, one cannot hope to take reality by assault or by surprise. One must always allow it to unfold (for that unfolding is the precondition for its deployment). As we all know, it is impossible to pull “directly” on a plant to make it grow; one must allow it to grow by itself.
 3. The truth underlying this contradiction is clear: it is only if one does not explicitly see it as such (I want to be virtuous) and it flows out sponte sua – flows directly from source, so to speak – that virtue (or capacity) is superabundant and inexhaustible, always there to be used. In contrast, if one constantly wishes to attain to virtue, fixing it as the goal to which one is “attached,” and strives, whatever the circumstances, to be virtuous, always acting deliberately “to that end” – never losing sight of virtue, never swerving from the aim of achieving it – then one will never find oneself sufficiently rich in virtue or capacity. What makes this proposition, in its succinct form, a paradox is the fact that – the better to imply it – it only hints at the process that, upstream, constitutes the sole condition that can lead to the full effect (through effectiveness). *Whoever attempts to do without that process and insists on aiming directly for an effect will always fall short of effectiveness. For that “aiming” undermines the effect, paralyzes it. If “there is something in view of which one takes action” and that action is deliberate, it is necessarily partial, for from the start it has had to privilege whatever is the aim of the action. Intending an effect kills it, dries it up, exhausts it*
 4. *There are two degrees of action: action without a specific aim is generous, abundant; concerted action is limited*
 5. *The effectiveness of an effect is always drawn from a prior wellspring and contains the overflow of an earlier effect from which it derives its resources. Therefore, the process that leads to it must begin upstream, at the source; if not, the effect is soon exhausted.*



1. *Positive spring loading sets up “good” outcomes – positive, unintended outcomes*
6. If one places oneself at the level of the “mother of effects,” one no longer needs to push at an effect in order to make it come about, for the capacity “appears” without one needing to “draw attention” to it; it manifests itself “without competition.” If, on the contrary, ignoring the fund of immanence from which an effect will spontaneously flow (as *effectiveness*), one remains fixed at the stage where the effect comes about, however much one forces it, that effect is bound to be dissipated
7. *Nonaction is action upstream.* What might have seemed like a paradox now dissolves: the sage “acts,” we are told, but does so “before reality is yet actualized”. *Action certainly does take place but upstream; and it happens so far upstream that it is not noticed.* For instead of trying to manage reality by grappling with it head-on and hoping to succeed by dint of great exploits, a sage knows (*and he who knows is a sage*) that it is always necessary to pass through a process in order to reach an effect. Upstream, reality does not resist. The action becomes exhausting, and the effect that it produces is minimal. Upstream from actualization, however, reality is still flexible and fluid; one does not have to confront it head-on, since whatever one might need to pressurize has not yet come about (cannot come about until the stage of concretization). At this early stage, reality is still largely at one’s disposition, its functions not yet channeled. So one can steer it gently, and the slightest inflection will be decisive, since the progressivity of things inclines it to deploy itself. *The earlier one intervenes upstream, the less one needs to act.*
8. The art is to win before having to fight. Instead of waiting for an effect from a confrontation, it is better to get at the enemy indirectly, from as far away as possible: if one knows how to discover the intentions of the enemy, one can kill the leader from a thousand miles away. For as we have seen, victory can be determined long before it is confirmed by any event. Again, it is “mediocre” to see victory only when it happens and when everyone else can see it too. *A real strategist possesses the skill to perceive the “seed” even before it has grown. By detecting the conditions for various possibilities in advance, such a strategist can mastermind the evolution of a situation from a distance, steering it in the desired direction.*
9. *Always keeping abreast of the beginnings of things, one can from the start make the most of the slightest possibility.*
10. The mistake that we make when we aim directly for an effect is that we are led to take individual measures in order to achieve that effect. We do not realize that everything that is individualized necessarily presents a particular individual aspect that immediately reveals a reverse aspect and opens up a path leading in the opposite direction. Thus, once something is particularized or characterized as being “good,” the possibility of “evil” looms up; everything that is recognized to be “upright” implies that other things may be “crooked”. And those notions of evil or crooked will then make headway. In similar fashion, whoever adopts particular measures in order to achieve a particular effect (directly) reveals the implied existence of opposed possibilities and thereby generates a *counter effect*



11. The capacity of a process only coagulates, so to speak, or becomes ostentatious where there is some deficiency. Otherwise it remains fluid, diffuse, present everywhere in equal measure – and is consequently imperceptible. And, just as all virtues draw attention to any absence of virtue, every effect that is well adjusted draws attention to all that remains ill adjusted
 12. The qualities peculiar to efficiency stem from the fluidity and continuity of a process: efficiency opens up efficacy to an aptitude that has no need of the concrete in order to operate. Proceeding, as it does, from a comprehensive system, it requires neither a goal nor effort. And given that, instead of being willed, it stems from the conditions implied in a situation, it never suddenly proves inadequate or misdirected. It belongs not so much to the domain of action (and events) as to that of happening-and-accomplishment. Whereas efficacy can be localized and its results are therefore directly perceptible, efficiency rightly passes unperceived, since particular effects relate to it only indirectly, and do not affect it. In Chinese thought, efficiency, unconnected to the notion of a cause, seems to be an efficacy that is no longer linked to any particular occasion and therefore seems to dissolve into the basis of things. It moreover itself becomes the source or fund from which everything that comes about constantly stems. In this respect it merges with immanence. And it is this basis (fund) of efficiency (immanence) that a Chinese sage hopes to find beneath all the superficial cluster of things (and the chain of causes). A military strategist likewise seeks to tap it in order to succeed.
 13. This efficiency that no one longer notices (and that therefore stands in opposition to the Western notion of the miraculous) and that has nothing to add to what is natural (and so is not *supernatural*) *becomes* the fund of immanence. The spirit of the valley, which – as we know – never dies, provides an image for this: it is the fathomless female through whose door existence endlessly pours forth, we are told, as if that door really existed. We have already seen how it is that, by operating continually upstream, efficiency remains undetectable; and now, we are also told, one can use it without ever exhausting it. In other words, this is a bottomless fund of efficiency from which effects never cease to flow. This is a return to experience: efficacy is all the greater when (in the form of efficiency) it cannot be seen. It *becomes* invisible, because the reality within it is no longer reified and because, being ready as it is to respond to the slightest stimulus, it is constantly reactive. At this stage, reality loses all inertia; it becomes completely alert. In consequence it is never still enough to be discernible. *The invisibility of efficiency is of the same order as imperceptibility, and the reason efficiency is invisible is that, unlike efficacy, it never allows itself to coagulate. This invisibility is of the order of that which is not yet perceptible (upstream).*
8. Manipulation
1. Controlling a situation from upstream, before its actualization, constitutes the Chinese art of manipulation. *For Chinese thought, everything constitutes a process – everything, including human behavior. Manipulation could thus be imperceptible. At the stage when everything is still smooth and malleable, people so easily allow themselves to be controlled that one encounters no resistance (and one is not bothered by one's conscience).* There are two complementary aspects to



it: one must progressively ensure that one holds the initiative, at the heart of the situation, in such a way as to make it lead to the creation of the desired conditions; and in order for this to happen one must reduce the opponent to passivity by very gradually stripping him of his ability to react. In this way one can eventually win without striking a single blow, since, by the time the fight at last begins, the enemy is *already* undone. In the operational field, this initiative results first in the enemy being drawn to the place where one wants him, at the time when one wants him there. For instance, one waits for him calmly, and he, arriving later and in a hurry, feels harassed. The ancient treatise makes no bones about how to achieve this: one simply has to seduce and lure him. To make sure that the enemy comes of his own accord to the spot where one wants him to be, one must hold out an incentive; and similarly, to prevent him from coming where one does not want him to be, one must hold out a danger. Of course, one lays out this incentive or this danger as one would a trap. For that is the very principle of manipulation and is also what makes it so fascinating. *To manipulate your enemy is to get him to get him, of his own accord, eagerly to want to do exactly what you, foreseeing that it will do him harm, want him to do (while he believes it will be to his advantage)*

1. *“Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” – Dwight D. Eisenhower*
2. You must begin by undermining the enemy. And to achieve that, you must disconcert, destabilize, and divert him. This *disarticulation* is itself a systematic concept that the treatise describes in detail: act in such a way that there is no communication between the front and the rear of the enemy’s forces, that no compensation can be made between positions where there are many soldiers and positions where there are few, that those who are extremely brave are unable to come to the aid of those who are not, that no solidarity can be maintained between the base and the summit, and so on. *As we have seen over and over again, it is a matter of starting a process the foreseen result of which will come about of its own accord, indirectly but ineluctably, thanks to the situation that develops. Infinitely preferable to the flamboyant heroics of action is the discrete work of transformation, which little by little erodes the enemy’s ability to resist. Chinese efficacy does not consist in acting for or against, by launching attacks or opposing them, but simply, within the terms of a process, in starting things or breaking them off (starting that which, as it develops, will of its own accord tend in the desired direction; and breaking off whatever, however minute but already present in the situation, could prompt it to evolve in a negative fashion).*
3. If you upset the enemy, you lead him not only to lose his confidence, but also to emerge from his reserve, abandoning the impassiveness behind which he remained concealed. He now reveals his own particular character and can be recognized. In this respect the strategy to adopt is twofold. On the one hand, you should lead your enemy to “adopt a definite position” so that you can establish a hold over him and work out how and where to attack him but at the same time, you must take care not to give the enemy any hint of your own position, so as to be able to continue to elude him. You force him to actualize the positioning of his own forces, displaying it openly in what is always a somewhat rigid fashion,



meanwhile keeping your own arrangement fluid so as to be able to adapt to anything. Whereas the enemy has “taken shape,” which means that he is definitely in one place and not in another so you can easily keep an eye on him, *you yourself remain inscrutable – by refusing to adopt a definite position – and continue to be ready to react to anything. For disposing your forces in a definite pattern bogs you down (you lose dynamism); it is too reifying (fewer possibilities are open to you), and it limits you to the exclusivity of all that is concrete. Your opponent is numbed, because he has been led into disposing his forces in a definite way; but you, for your part, remain alert*

4. *Warfare, we are told, in no uncertain terms, rests on the art of “deception”.* There can be no doubt that manipulation is a matter of dissembling and secrecy: when you are in a position to do something, persuade the other that you are not; when you are busy doing something, persuade the other that you are doing nothing, when you are close, seem to be distant; and so on. The first benefit, of course, is the effect of surprise that, together with the mobility that is facilitated by the absence of any definite disposition of your forces, makes it possible to attack the enemy where he is not prepared for it and to spearhead an attack when he is not expecting it. Indeed the reciprocity between these contraries is such that the art of attack can be reduced to the enemy not knowing what to defend, while the art of defense can be reduced to him not knowing what to attack.
5. *It is up to whoever is more skillful at intervening at an earlier point in the predetermination of conditions and, rendering himself ever more elusive in the same manner as invisible Efficiency, guiding the unfolding of the process from a greater distance*
6. We can distinguish two types of mastery, which stand in contrast (possibly to the point of excluding each other). In one type (as in Clausewitz’ theory), the exercise of force takes the form of a clash that is produced by a maximal concentration of action being focused on the one point and the one moment that are judged to be crucial and that now coincide to produce an event (the principal battle, Clausewitz’ study of the enemy’s center of gravity, the purpose of which is to reduce them to one single center on which the entire impact of the military clash can be concentrated. In the other type, the process is predetermined by its evolution being inflected so gradually that the process consists solely of successive moments, not one of them distinguishable, and the very *possibility of an event is dissolved*. In the course of such manipulation, efficacy is indirect and discrete, but in an engagement it is direct and manifest.
7. But who, precisely, is to be manipulated? The enemy, of course, but also, as must be recognized, one’s own troops, so that it is these who find themselves at bay, with their backs to the wall and forced to fight. It is not only the enemy who must be kept in ignorance of the maneuvers that you are undertaking; secrecy is also essential vis-à-vis your own men and in your own camp. The very logic of manipulation makes this essential. *To the embarrassment of today’s commentators, who consider this principle immoral, the ancient Chinese treatise declares that a good general must be able to block the eyes and ears of his soldiers and officers to that nobody realizes.* His influence, like that of nature, is



so assimilated, so constant and general, and so inexhaustibly replenished that it passes unnoticed

8. While everything converges upon the ruler and propels him forward, he, for his part, effaces himself, renouncing all desire for glory, even shedding his own individuality. As a perfect manipulator, he is dissolved within his manipulation. As a result of treating others as automatons, he too becomes one.

9. Manipulation vs. Persuasion

1. Rather than dissuading the other person, simply condition him, in advance, to agreeing. This way, straightaway he will place his trust in what the ruler recommends, without ever thinking to question it – let alone disagree with it. As we know, persuasion always involves an effort – the effort of rhetoric – and it is, moreover, never foolproof. Persuading someone else is always a battle. Whereas if the other person has no mistrust (has been led not to distrust you), you need make no effort at all and immediately get your way
 1. *The value and importance of trust in every relationship, consistently*
2. Two operations: opening and closing. When others open themselves up, abandoning their reserve, to lay their own feelings completely bare or, on the contrary, you deliberately block their way forward so that, faced with this barrage, they suddenly reveal their true feelings, whereupon you can draw your own conclusions as to the veracity of what he has said. The first maneuver is exploratory; the purpose of the second is verification. The first, by encouraging the “other” to be expansive, reveals what he wants; the second, which elicits a reaction from him, reveals whatever he was trying to conceal. Combined together, these maneuvers serve to “test out” and assess the other; either you go along with him so that he himself lets himself go; or else you move in the opposite direction so that, in reaction, he enables you to measure the strength of his resistance. Even his reticence and silence are revealing. In either case, whether he “opens” or “closes” his mouth, whether he speaks freely or is reticent, the other is revealed, or rather, he is manipulated, used purely as a tool. Speech here is not used for speaking but for getting the other to speak. It aims not to express your feelings, but to get the other to reveal his: in this way, you can adapt to him and, in consequence, be well received by him and, again in consequence, by believed him. Once the other has rendered himself transparent, he no longer offers any resistance, as our theorist of despotism also shows. According to the terms used in this treatise, the prime objective of opening and closing is to subject the other to an examination that will reveal “what there is in him” and “what there is not in him.” On the basis of what is thus shown to be full or empty, true or false, you will then be in a position to embrace his desire and thereby discover his deepest secrets. As in military strategy, these constitute the other’s true “disposition,” and here “disposition” means internal dispositions: his intentions and feelings.
3. Two methods may be adopted to this end. The first method is to keep quiet while the other speaks, and, as soon as something seems out of place in what he says, you go back over it to discover the truth. For given that speech is used to represent reality and that facts are “linked together,” when you compare them all, speech is revealing and makes it possible to see what lies behind it. However little he says, and even if it is to speak of matters other than whatever concerns you,



you can always discern hints and deduce the rest by making comparisons. Here is the second method. Suppose the other does not speak at all and so reveals absolutely nothing: then you need to change your tactics and suggest certain views of the situation that take him aback and force him to react. The information that you supply to him amounts to almost nothing, but he will nevertheless soon reveal himself. To achieve this, all you need to do is play on the polarity between the other and yourself: you go one way, thereby forcing him to come toward you; or else you fabricate a lack that prompts him to compensate for it. If you wish him to speak, you retreat into silence. Yet another tactic to fathom the feelings of others and force them to hide nothing is to push them into an extreme emotional state: either you choose a moment when the other is full of contentment and you go along with him in the direction in which his ideas are leading him so that, at the height of gratification, he allows his most intimate feelings to surface; or else you choose quite the opposite moment and proceed in the same way. When his fear reaches the highest pitch, he will likewise deliver himself utterly into your hands. On the basis of what you see, you become aware of what you cannot see. *In parallel, just as in military strategy, you must never reveal the slightest hint of your own disposition.* As the treatise says, never allow your door to be seen, and always remain a kind of ghost or spirit to your interlocutor.

4. *Conform with the other in order to dominate him. To make this point even more incisively and push the paradox as far as it will go: you follow him in order to lead him (that is to say in order to have the power to do so). Like attracts like, sponte sua, if you adapt yourself to the other, you make yourself like him, and, for this reason alone, he is attracted to you.* Like attracts like, sponte sua. If you adapt yourself to the other, you make yourself like him, and, for this reason alone, he is attracted to you. The whole difficulty of speech lies in knowing the mind of the person we are addressing so as to make our own words equate to his thoughts. The point then, is not to persuade the other by dint of reasoning but to fit in with the situation. If the man you address is besotted with glory and you speak to him of material advantages, he will look at you with scorn and eject you as a vile individual. If, on the contrary, he is thinking of material advantages and you speak to him of glory, he will consider what you say to be of no interest to him, because it is too far removed from reality and he will not be receptive to it.
5. *If we are bent on efficacy, it turns out to be far more productive to “go along with” reality, as Chinese wisdom and military strategy never cease to tell us, and to behave in consequence of that reality. In consequence means “by following” what is given so as to profit from it by conforming with it.* It is time to dispel an ambiguity that might otherwise make this concept unintelligible: wanting progressively to monopolize the initiative to your own advantage, both in warfare and in relationships based on speech, does not mean that you have to initiate situations. On the contrary, in fact, since whoever initiates something is always more or less bound to take a risk and, because he does so, then exhausts himself in seeking a way forward. In contrast, whoever follows benefits from knowing all the necessary landmarks and does not have to venture into unknown territory. His progress is much easier, since he knows what points of reference to make for. He has a *hold* on the situation, while the one who initiates does not.



1. *“What the pupil must learn, if he learns anything at all, is that the world will do most of the work for you, provided you cooperate with it by identifying how it really works and aligning with those realities. If we do not let the world teach us, it will teach us a lesson.” – Joseph Tussman*

10. The Image of Water

1. One particular image runs through the thought of ancient China, both irrigating it and linking it together: the image of water. The *Laozi* tells us that water is what is closest to the way, the *Dao*. Water is one of the realities already “actualized”, whereas the way takes us back to the deep, undifferentiated fund of things. Nevertheless, because it is infinitely flexible, *fluid*, with no form or sharp edges, and it never ceases, inexhaustibly, to flow, water guides us toward the Way; it takes us back toward that which is undifferentiated, that which we cannot see (in isolation) or name (separately), from which everything ceaselessly proceeds, and to which everything ceaselessly returns. Of all the realities that are actualized, water thus seems to be the one that is least so: it is not fixed in any definite aspect, never immobilized in any particular place. It is the least thing-like of all the things – the most alive, the most alert.
2. On the Greek side the seemingly commonplace image points towards nonbeing; on the Chinese side it points to the inexhaustible fund of immanence. Because it constantly renews itself and, flowing from some invisible point upstream, its course never stops proceeding, water represents efficacy. Or rather – and the image of *flowing* helps us to seize upon the difference – it suggests what the nature of efficiency might be.
3. The flexibility and “weakness” of water make it stronger than strength. That which is most flexible bestrides that which is most hard. It is through “weakness”, which generally prevails over strength, that the way, the *Dao*, is said to proceed. For true strength is strength that is contained, implied, not that which, in order to show itself, has to stiffen and in stiffening is led to snap, or at least to become worn. *In other words, true strength is not power that is displayed, but potential power. True strength is definitely characterized by the fact that it is not forced.* Chinese thought never tires of this theme: it is in the nature of water to flow downward; and the reason why it can even carry stones along with it is that it is content to follow the slope afforded to it. Water is the very image of that which never ceases to seek for a way out in order to flow onward but does so without doing violence to its natural inclination, simply going along with its propensity: “the conformation of troops must resemble water. Just as it is in the conformation of water to avoid what is high and incline toward that which is low, similarly, the conformation of troops must be to avoid the points at which the enemy is strong and attack it where it is weak.” *The general, like water, steers clear of obstacles and insinuates himself wherever the way before him is free; like water, he always sticks closely to the line of least resistance and at every moment seeks out where it is easiest to proceed.*
4. *Water, with its tendency to flow downward, manages to avoid any head-on “confrontation.” Having reached the lowest level, there is no need to fight. The best strategy is to begin by disengaging every adverse strategy by removing all competition, and the effect of this is devious. For whoever avoids all*



*confrontation can never be confronted. Not only would no one ever dream of it, but it would be impossible to achieve – because there is nothing on which to establish a hold. By deliberately placing yourself below, where the other would hate to find himself, you deprive him of the possibility of a confrontation and rivalry, and by doing so you undermine his resistance. By defusing antagonism, you disarm the enemy in advance. *The way of heaven, which is the most natural way, is to manage to win without confrontation**

1. Trust, positive springloading, humility, win/win

5. By itself, water has no form of its own: it constantly conforms and adapts; in fact, it is because it always adapts that it always tends to progress. *Similarly, as we have seen, it is only by adapting to the enemy that one can triumph over him. The situation of your opponent plays the same role for you as the lie of the land does for water: you mold yourself upon it, go along with it rather than opposing it. In short, you do not stiffen into any form of your own; instead you conform. Victory is then as irresistible and irreversible as the flow of water is. Carried along, as it is, inclining ever lower, it never goes astray, never hesitates. The form of water “is not in the water itself” but is produced by the lie of the land. Similarly, the potential is not in me but is produced by my opponent. Or rather, it is not in me (it would exhaust me), nor is it exactly in him, but I draw it from him. In other words, potential is not a matter of strength, my own potential clashing with that of my opponent. The potential lies in the situation and through it, as the situation unfolds, one can continually and effortlessly strengthen oneself. It lies in the possibilities that the situation opens up, just as the lie of the land allows the water to pass; and one exploits the situation just as the water does, knowing how to flow through it. Thus “potential is constituted by adapting to one’s opponent,” and it can be deployed because it lends itself to manipulation. *For just as water moves around the obstacles that stand in its path, there is never anything to be gained from resisting.* If the party in the inferior position determines to resist, he becomes the prey of the more powerful party. In this logic of a potential that stems solely from the situation, there is no room to accommodate the – gratuitous – surplus constituted in human effort. Sacrifice is useless – let alone dangerous – heroism. Nor is there a place for a plan drawn up in advance; and every general is declared to have the right to disobey the orders he has received the moment they become unsuitable. *Nothing is essential except the demands of the situation: the situation is the only thing that counts; it is what makes it possible to decide “what should be done” and “what should not be done,” and it is also the source of all dynamism. As is well known, nothing could be worse than wanting to repeat what has previously led to success, for since the situation is new, so is its potential, so any precedent is out of date. If, on the contrary, you determine your victory by adapting to the enemy’s configuration, your potential is inexhaustible: the strategy that you adopt will constantly take the enemy by surprise and will throw him off course. Its whole “mainspring” is to be found in constant conformation, which is a motivating force**
6. Just as water has no constant form, likewise, troops have no constant potential. *Not only does water symbolize potential through its ability to adapt; it also illustrates it through its variability.* It is not hard to see that, since the enemy’s



configuration always tends to become slightly modified, if I continue to conform to it, I shall ceaselessly be *transforming* myself. It is important to distinguish between the two notions, for although they are linked, they correspond to two different degrees of involvement. When the *modification* undergone by your opponent begins, it is always a response to particular circumstances, but you, for your part, must mobilize yourself completely each time such a modification occurs in order to react and adapt to it. *By transforming yourself totally in response to that modification, you renew yourself entirely from within and thus remain dynamic – to such a degree, in fact, that this effect, which is constantly manifested through the unfolding of the situation, should strictly speaking no longer be called “efficacy,” for once again that notion turns out to be too narrow. Rather, it is deployed as “efficiency.” To be capable of transforming yourself in response to the modifications of your adversary, in such a way as to obtain victory, is what is called divine efficiency. This is an infinitely subtle efficiency and so is unfathomable.* It merges with the efficiency of the fund of immanence, whence the great renewal of the world – that of its “days” and “seasons” – ceaselessly proceeds. Because it never fails, this is the most “divine” kind of efficiency, and at the same time, the most natural. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between what is “constant” and what is “changing.” *In warfare, the “logic” is constant but the “potential” is not, in the same way as the “nature” of water is constant but its “form” is not.* And, with no constant form, it is impossible to construct a model. For by seeking to slot the form into a statement and set it up as a paradigm, one would lose all the potential of the situation. In default of being able to construct a model of conflict, given that any conflict is constantly changing, the only possible “statement” about it must be *variable*. *Rather than construct a theory of forms, Chinese thought set up a system of differences. Instead of seeking to pick out common features that are more or less fixed, more or less stable, it sets out to explore the limits of the possibilities of change.*

7. *Cling to nothing* – in military strategy, the essential is to know how to slip from one case into another. *Nothing is more dangerous than immobilizing yourself within one particular case; and nothing is worse than setting up rules and imperatives for yourself, for these make your conduct inflexible and prevent you from the variation from which all potential stems. The treatise insists that there is nothing to which you should cling to at all costs: not risking your life, nor saving your life, nor being ready to rush in, nor the wish to remain “pure” in your honor, nor even loving your people. Not that any one of those particular attitudes is to be condemned in itself. It is simply that to cling to any one of them is blameworthy, for then you would be led by it no longer to go along with the situation as it changes. Like the sage, a general does not dig his heels in; all his skill lies in varying from one extreme to another – as widely as reality does.*
8. *Balance, power, circumstances all have the same meaning in Chinese.* “Circumstances” means *the way in which* reality never ceases to change in order to continue to deploy itself; and the weight of power simply results from such a tipping from one side to another. *In the West, circumstances are granted no more than the status of an accessory but in China, this uninterrupted flow of variance,*



so well-illustrated by the course of flowing water, is regarded as constituting the very course of reality.

What I got out of it

1. Do the painstaking work to understand the situation and what result is predisposed, situate yourself so that the result you want becomes immanent. It is not through effort, but through this process of constant adaptation and transformation that we get what we want. No longer is friction, heroism, willpower necessary, but deep strategy with constant adaptation to the circumstances. Nothing is essential except the demands of the situation: the situation is the only thing that counts; it is what makes it possible to decide “what should be done” and “what should not be done,” and it is also the source of all dynamism. So strategy is always a matter of knowing how to impinge upon the process upstream, in such a way that an effect will then tend to “come” of its own accord, *sponte sua*.

Sources

- *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking* by Francois Jullien



Teacher's Reference Guides

My “teacher’s reference guides” are deep dives into a subject, theme, person, or idea which are then distilled into (hopefully) clear, concise, and helpful resources. My goal is to effectively share what I think are the most actionable, impactful, and noteworthy takeaways of the topic at hand.

There isn’t much rhyme or reason to how I choose these teacher’s reference guides. Sometimes I want to dive deep on a specific concept such as complexity and spend months reading about that and sometimes I simply stumble across a person or topic randomly which captures my attention – trying to balance serendipity and chaos with routine and order.

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