2

Relying on the Propensity of Things

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 in 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 *(theorein),* 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.

If one no longer had to entertain the theory-practice relationship

A cleavage opens up

A difference thus appears, far away in China, that we should seize upon and that might open up new possibilities and at last shift the vision in which our tradition has become bogged down—as, indeed, all traditions tend to do, including the Chinese tradition (which is certainly extremely *traditional*). For this difference could show us how to track back beyond our own implicit choices (that we may consider to be self-evident but that, standing back from them in this way, we could well plumb further). We could do this by associating the difference that we have discovered with the common notion of efficacy. Rather than set up a model to serve as a norm for his actions, a Chinese sage is inclined to concentrate his attention on the course of things in which he finds himself involved in order to detect their coherence and profit from the way that they evolve. 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 on to 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.

Rely on the inherent potential

From our traditional perspective, let us look back a long way and consider a proverb from the kingdom of Qi, cited by Mencius (himself a moralist), that seems, in its own way, to sum up this alternative possibility. (In the last two centuries of Chinese Antiquity, it seems to have been the culture of the country of Qi, as opposed to the more traditionalist culture of Lu, that concentrated particular interest on efficacy.) The proverb runs as follows: "However acute one's intelligence may be, it is better to rely on the potential inherent in the situation"; "even with a mattock and a hoe to hand, it is better to wait for the moment of ripening" (MZ, II, A, 1). 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. For this potential is far more than—in fact something quite different from—just a collection of favorable circumstances. Caught up in the logic of a regulated evolution, it is driven to develop of its own accord and to "carry" us with it.

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 (xing),* as it develops and takes shape before our eyes (as a relation of forces); on the other hand, and counterbalancing this, the notion of *potential* (*shi*[a]), which is implied by that situation and can be made to play in one's favor. In the ancient military treatises (*Sunzi,* chap. 5, "Shi"), this is sometimes illustrated by the image of a mountain stream that, as it rushes along, is strong enough to carry boulders with it or by that of a crossbow drawn back and ready to discharge its arrow. In the frequent absence of theoretical explanations, in China, we need to interpret such images. Thanks to its downward-sloping course and its narrow channel (which result from the configuration of the mountain landscape), the situation is itself the source of an effect (the rushing stream is said to "obtain a potential," "to make things happen"). Similarly, in the case of the crossbow, the design works of its own accord as soon as one releases the arrow; it constitutes a mechanism.

The notion of the potential of a situation

Once they had identified this potential, Chinese strategists were careful to make the most of its consequences. And those consequences call into question what can perhaps be called the humanist concept of efficacy. For what counts is no longer so much what we ourselves personally invest in the situation, which imposes itself on the world thanks to our efforts, but rather the objective conditioning that results from the situation: that is what I must exploit and count on, for it is enough, on its own, to determine success. All I have to do is *allow* it to play its part. The Chinese strategists go on to point out that if strength and weakness are a matter of the situation, courage and cowardice are a matter of that situation's inherent potential. So courage and cowardice are a product of the situation

It is the potential of the situation that renders the combatants courageous or cowardly

rather than qualities of our own (and—one might add—rather than being our responsibility). As one commentator (Li Quan) glosses, if the troops obtain the strategic potential, "then cowards are brave"; if they lose it, "then the brave are cowardly." The treatise goes on to make the following point: a good general seeks success in the potential of the situation rather than demanding it from the men under his command. Depending on whether or not he knows how to exploit the potential of the situation, he renders them cowardly or brave. In other words (Wang Xi says), courage and cowardice constitute "modifications" of that potential.

A physical or strategic potential

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). The parallel is borne out by the image that brings this essay on strategy to a close:

> 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* 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. For it became traditional to conceive of it more widely, that is to

say, taking into account three interconnected aspects (see Li Jing). The first is that of a moral potential: "When the general despises the enemy and his troops are glad to fight, their ardor soars as high as the skies and their energy is like a hurricane." The second is that of a topographical potential: when the pass is constricted and the path is narrow, "a single man can guard the place and even a thousand men could not force their way through." The third is that of a potential through "adaptation": one can profit from the exhaustion and lassitude of the enemy when he is worn out by thirst and hunger, when "his forward positions are not yet well established and the troops that guard the army's rear are still crossing a river."... In all these cases, whoever knows how to exploit the potential of the situation can easily win the day. Or, as one commentator puts it, "with very little effort," one can produce "great effects."[b]

Little effort, great results

The ancient treatises on strategy do not hesitate to exploit this resource to the limit, even in ways that we find shocking. For, in order to increase the energy inherent in the situation, the Chinese general does not merely exploit all the aspects of the topography and the state of the troops that may be unfavorable to the enemy. He also manipulates the situation in such a way that his own troops are driven to display the maximum degree of ardor. To achieve this, all he needs to do is to lead them into a perilous situation from which the only way out is to fight as hard as they can (SZ, chap. 11, "Jiu di"). He therefore only engages battle in "mortally dangerous terrain," that is to say, after getting his troops to advance deep into enemy territory, for then it is as if, having made them climb up high, he "removed their ladder." Being unable to retreat, they are forced to fight as hard as possible. He does not ask his troops to be naturally courageous, as if courage were an intrinsic virtue, but forces them to be courageous by placing them in a dangerous situation in which they are forced, despite themselves, to fight bravely. The reverse is equally true. When he sees that the enemy has its back to the wall and so has no alternative but to fight to the death, he himself arranges an escape route for them so

Get their backs to the wall to increase the troops' potential

that his opponents are not led to deploy the full measure of their combativity.*

2

According to the 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. (Clausewitz calls this "a strategic plan": it lays down when, where, and with what kind of armed force battle should be joined.) 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 it is logically bound to take, that he intends to profit. So if any operation is to be undertaken before engaging in battle (be it in the "ancestral temple" or, as for us, "in committee"), it must be an operation not of planning but of "evaluation" (the concept of *xiao*) or, more precisely, "assessment" (in the sense of a preliminary evaluation on the basis of a calculation: the concept of *ji*ᶜ). 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.

Begin by evaluating the situation

*In *The Art of War,* Machiavelli makes the same observation: "Other generals impose upon their soldiers the necessity to fight by leaving them no hope of salvation save through victory. This is the most powerful and sure way to render soldiers determined in combat" (IV). The reverse is equally true: "One must never force the enemy into desperation; that is a rule that Caesar observed in a battle against the Germans. Noticing that their need for victory was giving them new strength, he opened up a way of escape for them, preferring to go to the trouble of pursuing them than to conquer them, with danger, on the field of battle" (VI). But for Machiavelli, this is no more than a remark in passing. He offers no theory to justify it. What Western strategy merely notes in passing, Chinese thinkers try to interpret and use as food for thought.

The first of the ancient treatises that we are considering thus starts off with a systematic description of the way in which this preliminary (and, as such, indispensable; SZ, chap. 1, "Ji") evaluation must be conducted. It should be 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 (1. Which sovereign makes the better morale prevail? 2. Which commander is the more capable? 3. Which side benefits more from the meteorological conditions and the topography of the terrain? 4. On which side are orders obeyed more punctiliously? 5. Which side is the better armed? 6. Which side has the better-trained officers and men? 7. On which side, finally, is discipline better observed?). The expert on 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.

The system of evaluation

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. The words of the ancient treatise deserve particularly close attention: "Once the assessment of what is profitable [made on the basis of the above seven points] has been agreed upon, one can deduce the potential of the situation, which can be helpful outside[d] ['outside' meaning beyond the rules of evaluation, on the terrain where operations are to take place]." 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 the situation. In this way, one escapes from a logic of model-making (where a model-plan is brought to bear) and also from the task of producing an embodiment (making a project or idea become a concrete temporal

reality), and one accedes to a logic of *unfolding:* one allows the implied effect to develop by itself, by virtue of the process that has been set off. Now circumstances are no longer conceived only (indeed, at all) as "that which surrounds" *(circum-stare),* that is to say, as accessories or details (accompanying that which is essential in the situation or happening—in keeping with a metaphysics of essence). Instead, 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).

Circumstances are no longer "that which surrounds"

Far from destroying a plan, circumstances create potential

As one commentator (Du Mu) rightly noted, even if one can be sure of victory on the basis of a preliminary assessment, the potential of the situation, for its part, cannot be "seen in advance" (i.e., before the start of operations), but only detected, since it changes all the time. Within this antagonistic process there is constant interaction: at every moment "it is on the basis of what is harmful to my opponent that I perceive what is profitable to myself" and, reciprocally, "on the basis of what is profitable to the enemy, I perceive what is harmful to me." As Wang Xi remarks, this comes down to recognizing that "the potential of the situation is whatever profits from that which is variable." With such a view of this potential, inevitably this essay on strategy moves on from the subject of initial assessments, conducted according to fixed rules, to consider how, later, to exploit the circumstances once the process has begun. The treatise now explains that, in the course of operations, one should constantly keep the enemy guessing, but also always adapt to him. If he is tempted by profit, "I lead him on"; if he is in disorder, I "seize hold of him"; if he stands fast, I "am prepared for him"; and so forth. Alternatively, if he is full of ardor, I "spread doubt among his ranks"; if he prudently adopts a low profile, I "pump up his pride"; if he is in splendid form, I "exhaust him." Given that I myself am constantly evolving in the presence of the enemy, I cannot tell in advance how I shall win the day. In other words, (Li Quan tells us), strategy cannot be determined "in advance," and

From an evaluation of the factors to the possibility of exploiting them

it is only "on the basis of the potential of the situation that it takes shape."[e]

Now let us return to the European side. When Clausewitz assessed the setbacks encountered by the theorists of warfare, he traced them back to three causes (*On Warfare,* II, 2): (1) The (Western) theorists of warfare "strove after determinate quantities," "whereas in war all calculation has to be made with varying quantities"; (2) they only took into consideration "material forces," "while all action in war is permeated by spiritual and moral forces and effects"; (3) "they only took into consideration the action of one of the combatants, while war entails a constant state of reciprocal action."

Warfare should be understood as "something that lives and reacts"

In contrast, as we can see, the concept of strategy elaborated in the ancient Chinese treatises, based on the key idea of the potential of a situation, is not affected by those three criticisms (and—from the outside—we can thus verify that the three causes are interlinked and refer back to a single logic): (1) The Chinese consider the potential of a situation to be variable; it cannot be determined in advance, since it proceeds from continuous adaptation; (2) the assessments from which the potential is deduced are adept at combining spiritual and physical features (taking into account both the morale on which the cohesion of the troops depends and also material questions of organization and weaponry); (3) the dimension of reciprocity lies at the very heart of what constitutes the potential of a situation (whatever is disadvantageous to the enemy is, by the same token, advantageous to oneself), and, in China, warfare is quite naturally thought of in terms of interaction and polarity, just as any other process is.

In consequence, Chinese military strategy is not affected by the theory-practice relationship. (The notion of the potential of the situation takes its place and, in its own way, provides the link between initial calculations and the inevitable variations that depend on the circumstances.) By the same token, it also avoids the inevitable inferiority ascribed to practice as opposed to theory, which has hitherto crippled Western theory, that of Clausewitz included. In short, it does not have to cope with "friction," since, whereas friction is a threat to any plan drawn up in

No more "friction," "chance," or "genius"

advance, adventitious circumstances are themselves precisely what make it possible for the implied potential to come about and deploy itself. The West, with its own kind of theoretical equipment, which is of a formalizing and technical nature, has proved itself to be singularly inept at thinking about the conduct of warfare, taking account only of secondary matters (preparations and material data) and failing to consider the phenomenon itself (although Clausewitz himself identified it as "something that lives and reacts"). That being so, only one option was left—one that even Clausewitz was unable to reject entirely—namely, to involve pure chance or genius. In contrast, the intelligence developed by Chinese thought is, manifestly, eminently *strategic*. By the end of Antiquity (at the time of the Warring States, in the fifth to fourth centuries B.C.), military treatises were producing a coherent account of that thinking, which was already leaving its mark on other sectors of human activity, in particular diplomacy and politics.

3

Court advisers and generals were confronted by similar problems. Whether he operated outside the court, arranging alliances, or inside it, trying to win the prince over to his own view, every diplomat had to start off by making a precise evaluation of the situation. He needed both to "appreciate" the relations of force at the political level and to "assess" the internal dispositions of his partners from a psychological point of view (*Guiguzi,* chap. 7, "Chuai"). Calculation of the relation between the forces in play thus involves a series of factors that, as before, are designed to reveal the situation clearly in all its aspects. It is necessary to gauge the respective sizes of the kingdoms involved, to evaluate their demographic dimensions, to measure their economic weight and wealth, and so forth. It is also necessary to determine which is favored topographically, which is stronger either strategically or because of the relations that obtain between the ruler and his ministers, and the like. Then it is necessary to estimate which allies one can count on, to whom the populace is best disposed, and who would profit from reversals in the

A similar systematic evaluation is required in diplomacy

current situation (see also chap. 5, "Fei qian"). By systematically completing this type of questionnaire and collating all the data, a political adviser acquires sufficient understanding of the factors in play to be certain of the result of the operation in which he then engages (and if he finds that his calculation was faulty, the treatise observes, that is because he did not yet understand the situation fully (chap. 3, "Nei qian"). Where the ruler is concerned, the adviser's calculations ought to focus on what he likes and what he dislikes so as to be sure to please him, thereby gaining his sympathy, thus winning him over and rendering him amenable to his own suggestions. As for other figures at court, the adviser needs to gauge their intelligence, their abilities, and their attitudes so as to make use of those factors in his handling of them.

In this domain, as in that of military strategy, there is no need to make a plan or to fix a norm to guide your behavior. In order to have the whip hand over another and make use of him as you please, the only way forward, after assessing him carefully, is to adapt yourself to him; whatever his personal characteristics may be, they can be used to your own advantage. If the person in question has moral priorities that cause him to despise riches, you cannot suborn him with the temptation of profit but can, instead, make the most of this by getting him to agree to an outlay of money. If he is so courageous that he scorns all danger, you have no way of frightening him but, instead, can profit by getting him to confront any dangers, and so on (chap. 10, "Mou"). 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. When your partner has doubts, you "modify" your conduct. Whatever he knows, you "agree that it is so." Whatever he says, you underline as being the essential point. When things seem to be "going well for him," you "make

them happen." Whatever he dislikes, you "adapt." Whatever he fears, you "ward off." And so on. Your partner in this way moves forward amid a continuous kind of acquiescence that progressively makes him weaker and gives you ascendancy over him. In this way, in relations with others (especially the ruler himself), you always act openly, without risk, neither planning nor forcing anything in advance, but always adapting so closely to the circumstances that, on the contrary, it is they that at every turn offer you a measure of control from which you can profit. Allowing yourself always to be carried along by the situation in this fashion, you gradually increase your control over what is happening. The treatise produces a striking image for this: a sage "spins," as a ball would, to find the "adequate" position in any situation. Because his strategy never limits itself to a single level, never commits him to any plan, it is fathomless: "fathomless" to others and "inexhaustible" to himself.

Adapt to circumstances in order to profit from them (rather than following an ideal model)

This thinking on diplomacy logically enough brings us back to the idea of the *potential of a situation* (again the notion of *shi*). For the sway that you acquire over the other person is not due to your own efforts nor to chance (neither would be successful anyway). It is due solely to the fact that you know how to make the most of the ongoing process: you rely on the determining factors that you have managed to detect in the situation and leave them to play in your favor. The formula in which this notion is expressed in this treatise on diplomacy is as decisive as those used in the treatises on the military art: "To manage things, you must establish the potential of the situation" (chap. 5, "Fei qian"). And, as we have seen, in order to establish that, you need first to evaluate the situation as precisely as possible. (In a diplomatic context, this involves determining who is on your side, detecting who agrees with you and who does not, noting what is said both "inside" the court and "outside" it, and so on.) It is the potential of the situation, which has gathered force as things have evolved, that will, in the clearest fashion, result in your acquiring maximum control rather than being defeated (chap. "Benjing yinfu"). For it is definitely that potential that "separates" "profit" from "harm," since it

The potential of the situation determines its evolution

is the factor that, through its "authority," influences how the situation will evolve.[f] We revert, quite naturally, to the image of round stones rolling down a slope and to the conclusion that the potential of the situation makes it impossible that things "should be otherwise." In diplomacy, just as in military strategy, there is a strategic *configuration*, and the objective conditioning that it produces is just as determining.

4

Now let us consider this potential in a situation within the framework of social and political organization. It takes the form of a *position of strength (shi)* that confers authority, while the gradient that produces an effect (for instance, stones rolling down a hill) corresponds to the difference in hierarchical positions. The potential in the situation creates a gradient of obedience, which is the source of whatever ascendancy is exercised. Thanks to your superior position, you are inclined to be heeded by your inferiors. However, this has nothing to do with your personal qualities or the efforts that you may make, or even the fact that you may have solicited their attention. It happens without any need to commit or expend yourself. This propensity to be obeyed stems solely from the position that you occupy. In short, the effect results from your position, not from yourself.

In politics, the potential is a position of authority

The slope of obedience

The place par excellence from which authority spontaneously stems is the throne. That is why one major school of thought in late Chinese Antiquity focused on the notion of authority and aimed to set up the throne as the source of absolute power. It did not do this, as happened elsewhere or was recommended by others in China (the Confucians), by invoking any kind of transcendence, in the name of any divine power, or in the name of any political contract reached between individuals in order to provide a basis for civil order. Instead, it did it solely in the name of efficacy: simply by reason of its higher position, the place occupied by the ruler emanated sufficient power to ensure that order reigned throughout the whole empire. It did so solely by virtue of the purely objective propensity

that emanated from it, not at all on account of the ever unpredictable qualities of any individual. These defenders of authoritarianism are known as the "legalists" (most unsuitably, given that their views were a far cry from our own idea of law): they were not concerned with legality, only with authority. What they tried to do was concentrate the potential of the situation in the position of a single figure, the prince, who was at the top of the hierarchy. Their aim was to turn political relations into a means purely for imposing authority. The hierarchical gradient from which the potential stemmed remained, but the potential of the situation, now polarized on the prince, became fixed. No longer eminently changeable, it was immobilized at a single point. The prince was carried by his people as a log perched on the summit of a mountain is carried by the mountain and dominates it (Han Feizi, chap. 14, "Gong ming").

The position of authority constitutes a mechanism

But how was this post of command from which limitless obedience flowed conceived? From the lofty position where he was perched and purely through his authority, the prince held both "sleeves" in his grip, distributing both rewards and punishments (both codified according to strict rules—*fa*—recognized by all and sundry and regularly applied). The two levers of fear and self-interest, the one repressive, the other an incentive, on their own constituted a device that enabled the prince to manipulate human nature as he pleased (HFZ, chap. 7, "Er bing"). At the same time, these defenders of authoritarianism (who, by the same token, were also the inventors of totalitarianism) understood full well that the basic essence of the power that one exercises over others depends on the knowledge about them that one acquires by forcing transparency upon their lives: the less one can conceal, the more docile one must be. An all-seeing eye has a paralyzing effect.

Far more effective than Bentham's "Pantopticism" (Foucault)

A punctilious system is set up for "dissociating" opinions (which makes it possible to challenge them individually) and combined with a "solidarization" of individuals (which makes them collectively responsible and encourages them to denounce one another) (HFZ, chap. 48, "Ba jing," sections 4 and 6). This is accompanied by secret,

subtle policing techniques that proceed, on the one hand, by means of investigations and, on the other, by the dissemination of misinformation designed to entrap people (the notion of *shu*). The prince thus turns his position into a veritable intelligence-gathering machine. Through this relentless collection of information and this meticulous gleaning of data, from deep inside his palace he is able to "see everything" and "hear everything" (given that, in these circumstances, everyone "becomes his eyes and his ears" (HFZ, chap. 14). As the first hint of rebellion is immediately denounced, he does not even need to resort to force to repress it. Basically, the art of government lies simply in making others compete in the maintenance of one's own position. The ruler himself does not make any effort at all but gets others to wish to do so for him. It is perfectly possible for him to devote himself to his task without leaving his palace or without even occupying his position there. He can perfectly well withdraw "to the seaside" yet still keep control of his mechanism of power and continue to direct everything. In other words, the position of authority needs to be occupied not in person, but only technically. It 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.

Make others compete to secure one's position

A perfect tyrant does not need to be present

Given the totally sufficient efficacy of the position of the ruler, the only task that falls to the prince in order for him to govern is to respect that position's automatic nature and to maintain it unimpaired. Since sovereignty only exists thanks to that position and can count on no feelings of love or gratitude on the part of the people (in contrast to the paternalism of which Confucius dreamed), that sovereign position has to defend itself against any infringement and prevent the establishment of any other position that could detract from its authority. From the point of view of that position, the prince and his subjects are perceived to be in a strictly antagonistic relationship. Power thus turns out to be the object of a permanent conflict, even if this remains for the most part latent. It is a conflict that opposes the despot to everyone else: his nobles, ministers, and advisers, and also his wife, mother, concubines,

Never allow this position to be encroached upon

bastards, and, of course, his son and heir, for all of them would like him to "lose" his position or at least to "share" it (HFZ, chap. 48, sections 3 and 8). This theory of the ruler's position thus exists in parallel to a subtle theorization of the psychology of seduction (in the sense of winning another's confidence), which stands in opposition to what we have learned of the art of diplomacy to be mastered by court advisers and which sets one on one's guard against the latter: above all the prince should beware of those who anticipate his desires and always act so as to please him, for by so doing they build up for themselves a stock of trust that makes it possible for them to shift him surreptitiously from his position of authority. They would do so not in order to overthrow the throne (that was unthinkable in China), but to usurp it, simply by taking the place of the current incumbent (to effect such a replacement would be all the easier given that individual qualities and commitment that might confer a personal dimension on power counted for nothing).

The other duty that falls to the ruler, as a way to use his position, is to allow that position to fulfill its role without interfering in the functioning of this mechanism by bringing his own generous sentiments and virtues into play. For, provided the apparatus represented by that position functions, others automatically submit to it. In contrast, because it introduces an element of unpredictability—inevitable where goodwill is concerned—and also the possibility of exceptions (to the norm), any measure of indulgence and generosity on the part of the ruler is an inevitable source of dysfunction. The human vibrations set off by such a measure would upset a system that, otherwise, works automatically. In making power depend on this, purely instrumental, position of authority, the general aim of the Chinese defenders of despotism was to depersonalize it as completely as possible (indeed it is my belief that they went farther along this path than any other cultural tradition). Whereas the ascendancy of a Confucian type of ruler stems from his wisdom and is manifested by the favorable influence that he spreads around him, the ascendancy of a legalist sovereign rests entirely on the huge inequality of his position as compared to all others

and the potential that stems from this. Two criteria are possible: on the one hand, personal *merit;* on the other, the occupation of this *position* of authority. And in the legalists' view, the one excludes the other (HFZ, chap. 40, "Nan shi"). Either you rely on your personal qualities and exhaust yourself in your efforts, in which case the result is always precarious (HFZ, chap. 49, "Wu du"), or else you rely solely on that position of authority, allowing yourself to be "carried" along by it, as a dragon is by the clouds (see Shen Dao), in which case all orders are unfailingly executed (HFZ, chap. 28), in the same unfailing way that a cargo carried by a ship is bound to float. . . .

Merit versus position

The continuity between the concept of military strategy that has remained traditional in China down to the present day and this particular political concept is easy to see. The courage or cowardice of a fighter depends on the potential of the situation just as the submission or insubordination of a ruler's subjects do (the same notion of *shi* obtains). In both cases, the objective conditioning of the situation matters more than the intrinsic qualities and efforts of individuals. But whereas in thought about warfare this concept of a potential rested on interaction and polarity, and the situation was always considered as it evolved (in fact, its very evolution was the source of its effects), in thought about power (and how to increase it to the maximum), the defenders of despotism sought to monopolize all the potential, making it converge upon the throne in such a way as to immobilize the situation (in an exclusive—and perpetual—relationship based on submission). The system was blocked and became aberrant. Yet that did not make it totally inefficacious. It was by scrupulously following the teaching of those theorists of despotism that the Chinese empire was founded (in 221), and, as is well known, it became the world's first bureaucratic empire.