What do we mean when we say that something has “potential”—not “a potential for” but an absolute potential—for example, a market with a potential, a developing business with a potential? When we say that something possesses a potential, we mean that by its very nature it is destined for some kind of development on which we may rely. Instead of having everything depend on our own initiative, we recognize that the situation itself carries a certain potential that we should identify and then let ourselves be carried along with it. This use of the expression “to carry a potential” remains somewhat vague, or at least belongs to the sphere of practice, on the edge of language, so it may not occur to us to probe deeper into the logic behind it. Yet it seems to me possible that a whole new vision of our engagement in the world can be sensed here; and even that, ill-adjusted as it is to our declared theoretical assumptions, it might offer us an opportunity to overstep their limits, to move on beyond them, to rethink them and discover different sources of “efficacy.”

Those sources are different from those of the European tradition, or at least the tradition that has come down to us from the Greeks: a tradition that conceives 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 our-
selves 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.

The fact is that, beneath the question of efficacy, another gradually
surfaces: not the question of being and knowing, which is constantly
raised by metaphysics, nor that of action, which is its ethical corollary,
but the question of the conditions of effectiveness. What, strictly speak-
ing, is an effect? Or how does reality realize itself?

To move on from the question of efficacy, which still bears the
imprint of voluntarism, to that of efficiency, which implies an underlying
fund of immanence, we need to attempt a shift. A shift in two senses of
the term: a shift away from our normal thinking habits, a move from one
framework to another—from Europe to China and back again—which
will undermine our representations and get our thoughts moving; and
also a shift in the sense of shifting the impediment that is preventing us
from perceiving what we have always blocked out of our thinking and,
for that very reason, have been unable to think about.

In order to operate this shift, we need to recast our language and its
theoretical assumptions. As we proceed, we must divert it away from
what it finds itself inclined to say even before we begin to speak and open
it up to a different intelligibility, urging it toward other resources.

The Objective of This Study and the
References on Which It Draws

The present essay complements an earlier one devoted to ethics (Fonder
la morale, Grasset, 1995), which was prompted by a reading of Mencius.
In the China of late Antiquity, an opposition between two schools of
thought became increasingly apparent. On the one hand were the
“moralists,” best represented by Mencius (MZ) and the Doctrine of the
Mean, or Zhong yong (ZY), from the fourth century B.C.; on the other
were those who can be called the “realists,” who, in the frantic dash for
power in which the warring states were involved, reacted against tradition and the teaching of the rites.

It was the latter group, the “realists,” who developed the notion of efficacy most explicitly in China. But the moralists, in particular Mencius, while taking up opposed positions, were nevertheless in agreement with them on many points. For the notion of efficacy was shared by all, the only difference in position being the “way” in which to proceed.


I also cite Sun Bin (fourth century B.C.), who is likewise extremely interesting, although the text is much more corrupt. I use the edition of Deng Zezong, *Sun Bin bingfa zhu yi* (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1986); see also the more recent volume edited by D. C. Lau and Roger Ames, *Sun Pin: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

On politics, the text used is that of Han Feizi (HFZ, 280–234), the most brilliant thinker on the subject of Chinese despotism, misleadingly known as “Legalism.” The edition I use is that of Chen Qiyou, *Han Feizi jishi* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974, 2 vols.).

On diplomacy and what we would call rhetoric, although it is really more of an antirhetoric, the text used is the *Guiguzi* (GGZ, 390–320?). In the absence of an altogether reliable edition, which is explained by the scant attention usually paid to this text, I use not only the classic commentaries (Yin Zhizhang, Tao Hongjing), but also the recent information produced by Zheng Jiewen in *Guiguzi yanjiu* (Haikou: Nanhai chubangongsi, 1993) as well as *Neng bian shan dou* (Ji’nan: Shangdong renmin chubanshe, 1995), together with that provided by Feng Zuomin in *Baihua Guiguzi* (Taiwan: Xingguang chubanshe).

Warfare, power, and speech are the three principal subjects on which I focus. The *Laozi* (LZ, sixth or fourth century B.C.) is unclassifiable, as it covers all of them. For that reason I have sought to pluck it from the mystical context in which Western scholars have tended to place it and establish it as fundamental to thought on efficacy. The edition of the text that I have used, together with its commentary by Wang Bi, is *Wang Bi ji xiaoshi*, volume 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980). The best Western edition is that produced by Robert G. Henricks, *Laotzu: Te-tao ching* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

Finally, I have decided not to make use of “stratagems” such as the
Thirty-Six Stratagems (Sanshiliu ji), both so as to respect the historical unity of the corpus (since such collections are clearly of a later date and merely diffuse the contents of earlier works in the form of proverbs) and also in order to dissociate the present study from the “chinoiseries” to which some authors frequently limit themselves.

The present essay is, in truth, not a treatise on efficacy, but a treatise about efficacy. As such, it returns to questions already tackled in The Propensity of Things (New York: The New Press, 1995) but endeavors to extend their context and pursue them further.

The superscript letters refer the reader to the glossary of Chinese expressions at the end of this volume.