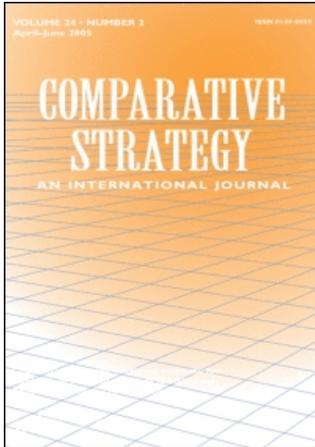


This article was downloaded by:[George Mason University]
On: 3 January 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 768410858]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Comparative Strategy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713769613>

Efficacy, East and West: François Jullien's Explorations in Strategy

Paul Dragos Aligica ^a

^a Mercatus Center at George Mason University, Arlington, Virginia, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Aligica, Paul Dragos (2007) 'Efficacy, East and West: François Jullien's Explorations in Strategy', *Comparative Strategy*, 26:4, 325 - 337

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/01495930701598623

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01495930701598623>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Review Essay

Efficacy, East and West: François Jullien's Explorations in Strategy

PAUL DRAGOS ALIGICA

Mercatus Center at George Mason University
Arlington, Virginia, USA

The current explosion of interest in strategic thinking and its applications to business and daily life represents one moment in the millennial quest for a formula for successful decision making and social action. To discover the code for “making the right moves,” the science of making the correct decisions or, in other words, the “theory of strategy” has fascinated statesmen, businessmen, and generals alike. The remarkable magnitude of current interest differs from the past only in that it is driven by two special factors. On the demand side, it is the expression of the modern, mass democratic society that, due to its social mobility and wealth, creates a larger and larger sphere of action and decision making for an increasing number of people. On the supply side, it is the outcome of the general process of intellectual division of labor and institutionalization of inquiry and the subsequent emergence of a large number of “experts” on specific issues, “strategy” being one of these new areas of specialization. However, despite this impressive alignment of forces, the promised results of the effort to create a “cumulative science” of strategy are not in sight, and the “theory of strategy” remains as elusive as ever. Powerful statistical techniques are mobilized to squeeze the “essence of strategy” out of empirical data and sophisticated game theory is marshaled to achieve, by deduction, the same goal. Yet one cannot avoid the feeling that, in fact, in many respects these efforts and the ensuing literature fail to advance our understanding of the universe of strategy in substantive ways. No algorithm for action and success has been discovered. In business, war, or politics, we rely pretty much on the same heuristics and biases, bolstered by personal and tacit knowledge, that we used in the past.

This is the background on which François Jullien has projected his work. Philosopher, sinologist, and intellectual historian stepped in ancient literature, the French scholar makes a bold attempt to rise above the current trends and fads and challenge the very foundations of the way we think about strategy. In a series of books focused on the twin themes of efficacy and strategy—three of them translated into English: *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking* (2004), *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (2001), and *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China* (1995)—Jullien takes his readers away from the recent hype and redirects their attention toward the deepest conceptual and cultural assumptions behind the ways they define and think of strategy. Moreover, he does this in a truly comparative framework, looking beyond the horizon of Western civilization. In doing so, not only does he open new avenues that indeed go beyond the orthodoxies and mirages of the day, but he also refreshes our understanding of the Western tradition of strategic thinking. Although the range of his analysis and scholarship, demonstrated in several books and innumerable articles, is as vast as it is diverse, it all clusters neatly around a core of arguments regarding the nature of efficacy and the search for the ways to understand, conceptualize, and operationalize it for strategic

purposes. An overview of the logic and main building blocs of that argumentative line is, thus, the best way to approach and assess Jullien's work.

In Search of a Theory of Strategy

The starting point of Jullien's explorations is precisely the ongoing and obstinate Western quest for a theory of strategy. To illustrate the point, he uses the case of warfare or, to be more precise, the search for a theory of warfare. Given that warfare, as social action, is radical and leads to extremes, writes Jullien, it is particularly well-suited to illustrate strategic interaction and to serve as a crucial case study. A life-and-death conflict not only represents a basic human strategic situation but its object, actors, and general parameters are sharper, more unequivocal, and firmer than in any other case. Precisely because of this clearness and exemplary simplicity, the subject of warfare provides evidence of how difficult it is to theorize strategy, or more generally, how to act strategically. The difficulties in producing a theory of warfare is the foil on which one could start to understand the profound quandary of a theory of strategy.

Following Jullien, one could use Clausewitz's work as a very helpful investigation vehicle.¹ In the early nineteenth century, while assessing the diverse European attempts to produce a theory of warfare, Clausewitz was the first to note the failure of all those attempts. Looking especially at the "modern" authors, he noted that their failure stemmed primarily from the fact that they seemed unable to grasp the full implications of the "fundamentally active principle" on which warfare was based. Indeed, under the spell of the "scientific enlightenment" and the influence of the technological revolution under way in Western Europe, they were increasingly tempted to conceive warfare from the point of view of rigid scientism and the corresponding mechanics of "material production." Starting within such a framework, the "scientific" view of warfare had sooner or later to concentrate mostly on material and quantifiable issues, such as the applied science of weapon production and constructing fortifications, or on the treatment of the "human factor" in similar terms. Consequently, the theory of warfare was increasingly seen as an elaborated branch of mechanics that, at the foundational level, was reducing warfare to simply numerical data, i.e., clashes of forces expressed by mathematical laws. But all that, noted Clausewitz, produced "purely geometrical results that have no value at all." Such theorization was incapable, in his view, of "dominating real life." Real war was remote and different from the mathematized or geometrified rendering of it and if there was something remarkable about those theories, it was the larger and larger gap between real life and the abstract formulas. Writing at the end of the first wave of the Western scientific revolution, Clausewitz was the first to understand and reveal this problem.

But when he tried to surpass the dead-end, Clausewitz himself, warns Jullien, ended up in one. He started by defining warfare according to a "model" form, as an ideal and pure essence: "absolute warfare." He went on to contrast this model to "real" warfare, "as modified by the facts of reality." Although he believed that "past thinking about warfare missed the point in setting out to make a model of something that could not be modeled," Clausewitz still couldn't break free from a foundational assumption that seems to be the basic framework of our way of thinking strategy: the dualism of theory and practice. A model determined on a "theoretical" basis is set as an ideal and once established, the social actor draws on "willpower" in order to impose it upon reality. But in fact, although we start with models, ideals, plans, and theory, "everything appears in a different guise if one moves from abstraction to reality." Reality and theory seem to be intrinsically at odds—and this is a crucial observation. This, suggests Jullien, in fact may be the phenomenological essence

of warfare: the fact that the model is always in some degree or another attenuated in reality: “the essence of warfare is to betray its model.” In other words, “in warfare, more than in anything else, things do not happen as one thought they would and from close-up appear altogether different from how they appeared at a distance.”²

Real war is so remote from abstract theories that the residual elements, or the factors unexplained by theory, became the key explanatory variable. In the end, the key of both success and failure has to be found outside what initially was advanced as “the theory.” Or as Jullien puts it, “in warfare there are 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.” The conduct of warfare “proving to be resistant to theory, the only way left to account for military successes is to invoke the natural dispositions and ‘genius’ of those involved (which are beyond the bounds of theory).” The same is true in the case of failure. Because the “model” implies success, attention gets refocused on the problem of the “dilution” of the model. This is well illustrated by Clausewitz, who, true to this inner logic, had to focus on the source of this dilution: “the nonconductive circumstances” that block the “complete realization” of the principle of warfare. And so he came with an explanation: the ideal model intended as a guide for action fails because of “friction.”³ The war mechanism constructed using the general laws encounters “countless points of friction” that create a critical mass sufficient to “eventually throw the action off course.” To sum up, although Clausewitz identified the problem of the gap between theory and practice, he remained trapped in it. And although he rejected the geometrical and mathematical view of war, the key role he gave to the concept of friction betrayed the fact that he “himself clings to a mechanistic model in his thought.”

Clausewitz’s effort, as recounted by Jullien, is symptomatic in more than one way. First, it illustrates the seduction of the mechanical way of thinking even for those who resist it. Second, it also shows the measure in which the gap between theory and practice stands at the core of our theories of warfare and, by implication, our theories of strategy. That, writes Jullien, should not be surprising: Newtonian mechanical analogies are an enduring feature of modern culture. And ever since Plato and Aristotle, Western philosophy engaged in a systematic attempt to find appropriate ways to mediate between theory and practice. Yet, the problem of the gap between them has remained unsolved. Clausewitz cannot conceive of warfare without an abstract model, a “plan of war” devised well in advance. This, for him, remains “the framework for the whole act of war.” And thus, Jullien’s masterful analysis concludes, Clausewitz vacillates between two views. On the one hand is the view undermined by his own analysis. From this perspective, first the ideal form is devised, then one’s will—an “iron will” that “overcomes all obstacles”—is mobilized to materialize the model. That implies the existence of a science guiding the steps of the process, a method by which will is mobilized and the model is imposed and of a mechanics of diminishing the friction. On the other hand, the same Clausewitz implies that warfare is not a matter of willpower “applied to inert matter,” as earlier theorists wrongly believed. Instead, it “lives and reacts,” and, as Jullien puts it, “the vivacity of reaction will necessarily foil any preconceived plan.”⁴

If that is the case, then the limits of scientific-mechanical reasoning should be obvious. And that explains why Clausewitz, in the end, eschews the mantle of science and “aspires to do no more than ‘educate’ the mind of a future military leader or, even more modestly, ‘to guide him in his self-education’ by providing him at least with a reference point on which to base his own judgment: in short, to ‘cultivate’ him but not to give him a method to be applied mechanically.” Clausewitz himself was pretty straightforward: “in action such as warfare, in which a plan based on general conditions is so often upset by particular and

unexpected phenomena, it is necessary to leave far more, generally, to talent and to rely less than in any other domain on theoretical recommendations.” That is why the best that Clausewitz could do in exploring the theory of warfare was to theorize that deficiency on the part of theory:

We can see that warfare is not a science. But, Clausewitz adds, nor is it an art, and it is striking “to note the extent to which the ideological schemata of the arts and sciences are ill-suited to this activity.” And he immediately spots why: it is because the activity of warfare affects an object that lives and reacts. But for all that, as we, along with Clausewitz, still note, however much we criticize those “schemata,” it is not easy to avoid them.⁵

A Theory of Strategy

A journey at the foundations of strategy, using as a vehicle the problem of war and Clausewitz’s dilemmas regarding its study, reveals the puzzles generated by any approach that proceeds from model making and that limits itself to a quasimechanical view of strategic interactions. At the same time, it reveals the degree to which the very idea of a theory of strategy is the product of a basic dichotomy of Western thought: the dichotomy between theory and practice, between an abstract model or norm and the reality on which the model is to be imposed. From this perspective, strategic action is “a coupling of theory and practice,” an action that “comes from outside to impress itself upon the world,” a norm that we must then embody in facts. This coupling, explains Jullien, “we no longer even dream of questioning.” And it forces acceptance from us because “however we reformulate the terms, we cannot get around them.” Our strategic thinking goes back to a basic assumption, a profound interpretation of human action that is so ingrained in Western thought that questioning it has become unthinkable:

This is one of the most characteristic moves made by the modern Western world (or maybe quite simply the world as a whole—if it has been standardized in accordance with the Western model): a revolutionary designs the model of the city that must be built; a soldier sets out the plan of war to be followed; an economist decides on the growth curve to target; and, all of them, whatever their respective roles, operate in a similar way. Each projects upon the world an ideal plan that will then have to be incorporated into factual reality. . . . Our inclination is to extend to everything this model-making.⁶

Yet, as the overview of Clausewitz’s investigation of the sharpest and clearest form of strategic interaction—warfare—revealed, this mode of thinking, useful as it may be, leads us into dead ends. Moreover, at the same time it creates unwarranted expectations of our cognitive abilities. It is implied that we may be able to create—once enough cognitive effort, empirical data, and analytical tools are mobilized—a “scientific” metatheory of strategy. Clausewitz had an intuition that something was wrong. Yet he was unable to break free from the “theory-practice” notion. Unable to break out of the paradigm according to which Western thought conceived of action, “his only solution was to reconsider the traditional interplay between model and reality,” then “to set those terms in opposition and think about what divides them”:

Unable to shake free from the theory-practice relationship, the relation between “ideal” and real warfare, and being at the same time all too aware of the reality that that relationship failed to reflect, Clausewitz eventually manages to make use of this perception—but he does so by turning it around: he accurately perceives that this mismatch constitutes the peculiarity of warfare. The defining characteristic of warfare is precisely the inevitable distance that separates the reality of it from 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.⁷

In further articulating Clausewitz’s intuition, Jullien shows that the defining characteristic of strategy is precisely the inevitable distance that separates the reality of it from its model. In short, to paraphrase, to think about strategy is to think about the extent to which it is bound to betray the ideal concept of it. And thus we are put in the position to ask “point blank” what conditions are necessary for a science of strategy to be possible. That is to say that by engaging in an investigation at the foundations of strategic thinking we are forced sooner or latter to ask, just as Kant asked, “What are the conditions necessary for a science of metaphysics to be possible?”—or, as Newton asked, “What are the conditions necessary for a science of physics to be possible?” And once we have asked those questions, we realize that “of all the forms of logic that rule the world of action (which are, however, copied from those that rule the world of knowledge), the most rigorous of them, that of the ‘law’ is inapplicable to the conduct of warfare because of the changeable and variable nature of the phenomena involved.” Managing humans and their actions means an ability to appreciate “the particularities of a situation” and do so “on one’s own personal talent.” At this level, “given the inevitably singular and therefore unprecedented nature” that is the essence of strategic action situations, “any formalization, which implies repetition, is extremely dangerous. And faced with the impossibility of relying on a model, theory is inevitably found wanting.”⁸

And thus the study of this partial failure of theory reveals a foundational challenge: “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 is indeed both a practical problem and a deep philosophical challenge. And, as Jullien notes, it was recognized as such from the very beginning by the founding fathers of Western intellectual tradition. Aristotle was the first to recognize that “although science may impose its rigor on things by understanding their necessary aspects and thereby achieving technical efficacy, the situations in which our actions are performed are, for their part, indeterminate.” Our actions “cannot eliminate their contingency, and their particularities cannot be covered by any general law.” In consequence, action cannot be classified simply as an extension of science; the discrepancy between the planned model for our action and what we manage to achieve in action is unavoidable. And once those basic assumptions of the mode of thinking that leads us to these conclusions are accepted, all one could do is simply try to gauge and manage the gap. Failure, “friction,” or “deviations” from the model become the pivotal element. The long “theory-practice” story is, in respect to strategic action, set up from its very foundations as a story of failure. “After hoping for so much from the human aptitude for science and after allowing us to glimpse the perfection of essences, how could it resign itself to leaving us in such a wretched state: ill-equipped to manage in the world and to maneuver so as to succeed in our projects?”⁹

But what happens if the assumptions that shape the theory-practice duality that lie at the foundations of the Western way of thinking are relaxed? Or, is it possible to sidestep this dichotomy? Is it possible to deal with the theory-practice gap other than by trying to limit

it? Is it even possible to think strategically outside this dichotomy? Or, at a minimum, is it possible to relegate this dichotomy to a secondary role in the grand equation of strategic calculation? The remarkable contribution of François Jullien's work rests precisely in the attempt to address these questions. In his search for the roots of strategic thinking, he started as a student of ancient Greek thought and the ensuing Western tradition, of which Clausewitz's work was a milestone. But for Jullien what was initially an intellectual maneuver attempting to reach and explore the very conceptual foundations of strategy proved to be just a preliminary step. Jullien soon became dissatisfied: studying the ancient Greeks as a means to understand the Western tradition was not illuminating enough. Only an element of comparison could put the real essence of Western strategic thinking in perspective. And that element was discovered in the works of ancient Chinese strategists.

The Chinese Alternative

Based on the experience and insights given by his previous investigations of the roots of Western thought on strategy, Jullien's analysis identified the sources of Chinese strategic thinking in a specific "worldview." Chinese thought, writes Jullien, never constructed "a world of ideal forms, archetypes, or pure essences that are separate from reality but inform it." From this perspective the whole of reality "is 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 something "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, of the theme of the 'way,' the dao)." Consequently, "the Chinese sage never conceived of a contemplative activity that was pure knowledge (theorem), possessing an end in itself." Neither did he advocate that "such knowledge represented the supreme end." 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."¹⁰

But what does all this mean for strategic action? To answer the question, Jullien uses a series of images and proverbs that were used by ancient Chinese authors such as Mencius: "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." In other words, strategic action is not so much a matter of using various tools and devices in order to force by willpower a model on reality. Instead, "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." This means that "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." At the extreme, the contrast can't be starker: you do not try to shape the situation but "allow yourself to be carried along by the situation" and by doing that "you gradually increase your control over what is happening." The image used by the ancient treatises is considered arresting by Jullien himself: "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."¹¹

This shift of vision, suggests Jullien, opens up a perspective that may get us out of the dead end in which our Western tradition has become bogged down. By simply engaging

mentally with this alternative paradigm we are forced to “track back beyond our own implicit choices” that “we may consider to be self-evident.”¹² And because we automatically use the Western paradigm as a foil, we automatically engage in a comparative exercise that unfreezes our modes of thinking. This exercise encouraged by Jullien is indeed an example of “comparative strategy” study at its best. We could contemplate side by side the Western strategist with his inclination to “set up a model to serve as a norm for his actions” and the Chinese sage who 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.¹³

Jullien doesn't stop at this observation. In his analysis of the Western paradigm he reveals a basic dichotomy defining it. Now, in the analysis of the Chinese paradigm he comes to a similar finding. Chinese strategic thinking grows around two notions: The notion of a situation or configuration (*xing*), “as it develops and takes shape before our eyes as a relation of forces”; and the notion of potential (*shi*), “which is implied by that situation and can be made to play in one's favor.”¹⁴ 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. Accustomed to the Western mode of linking prediction and science (and taking for granted the theoretical framework uniting them), we are tempted to apply the same template to this dichotomy. But that would be a mistake. In the Chinese paradigm, the potential of the situation, “cannot be ‘seen in advance’ (i.e., before the start of operations), but only detected, since it changes all the time.” Used to operating under Western assumptions, we have an overrated view both of the crucial role of prediction and of its epistemic credentials. The Chinese strategist looks at the configuration and its potential and makes the most of its consequences as they unfold. Predicting the future while following an ideal model does not occupy the forefront of his strategic thinking. Prediction, rather, transmutes into continuous adaptation—forecasting becomes sense-making and pure alertness. The Chinese strategist adapts to circumstances and opportunistically takes advantage of their unfolding. His reading of the circumstances and their potential is a process of ongoing updating. What counts “is no longer so much what we ourselves personally invest in the situation” but rather “how we exploit the potential emerging from the situations.” A Chinese strategist “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 bound to take, that he intends to profit.”¹⁵

As a parenthesis, one could not fail to note that this is the actual context of the well-known Chinese adage: “The victorious troops thus begin by winning and only then engage in battle, whereas the defeated troops begin by engaging in battle and only then try to win.”¹⁶ The reason is transparent because it is just an application of the same logic: the strategist intervenes upstream in the process where the favorable factors are identified “before they have actually developed.” When the “accumulated potential” is revealed to be favorable, success is assured and the enemy “already defeated.” In other words, “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.” The victor is already decided even before battle commences. War is not action and engagements alone, or “a number of successive actions,” but an ongoing process:

The Chinese . . . who were very much aware of the effects of even the briefest operations that might have a decisive impact, emphasized the progressive duration of a transformation in the course of which the potential of the situation accumulates. The time in between engagements is by no means sterile, so to speak, “dead time,” however inactive it may seem, for this unfolding of time allows for an evolution thanks to which the relation of forces may eventually incline to one’s own advantage. Time brings about not a “dilution,” but a “maturation.” The Chinese conceived of warfare not as action but as a process.¹⁷

This reminds one in a twisted way of Clausewitz’s adage: “War is a continuation of politics by other means.”¹⁸ The correspondence of perceptions between Clausewitz and the Chinese strategists is palpable. And precisely due to the similarity, we have in this example an excellent comparative case illuminating how different cultural circumstances shape the connotation and nuances of a specific strategic insight.

Other corollaries of the above views help us to better grasp the differences between the two paradigms of strategic thinking. Another major corollary implies a change in the way one perceives the process of preparing for a strategic confrontation. From the Chinese perspective, the key operation before engaging in battle is not one of planning but one of “evaluation” or, more precisely, “assessment.” This is indeed the logical outcome of an approach that relies fundamentally on positioning and adapting to evolving circumstances. Strategy is increasingly becoming a systematic intelligence operation and evaluation of information rather than the devising of a plan and imposing it on reality through willpower. Yet another corollary addresses the very essence of what a “battle” is. Once the battle is joined, the configuration and its potential are those determining the outcome. The general who has the right information and understanding of the forces at work simply rides on the potential identified through the analysis of the situation.¹⁹

One of the most extreme and therefore most telling examples of this logic at work refers to qualities that in the West are considered as intrinsically belonging to individuals, not circumstances. Yet, in the Chinese paradigm presented by Jullien, a general relies for bravery on the potential of the situation rather than the individual soldiers. Courage and cowardice are a matter of that situation’s inherent potential for cowardice or bravery and the soldiers are just the conduit of that potential. As one commentator quoted by Jullien states, if the troops obtain the strategic potential, “then cowards are brave,” but if they lose it, “then the brave are cowardly.” The ancient treatises on strategy, writes Jullien, do not hesitate to exploit this resource to the limit, even in ways that we find shocking. In order to “increase the energy inherent in the situation,” the Chinese general manipulates the situation in such a way that his own troops are driven to display the maximum degree of ardor. In brief, he puts them into a perilous situation from which, unable to retreat, the only way out is to fight as hard as they can:

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 that his opponents are not led to deploy the full measure of their combativity.²⁰

This point allows a crucial observation to be made. If one looks back at the Western tradition one could find instances when similar insights are expressed. For instance, in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli makes a similar point: “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.”²¹ Machiavelli, akin to the Chinese strategists, looked at both sides of the coin: “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.”²² The similarity of perceptions between Machiavelli and the Chinese strategists is palpable. And precisely because the points are similar we have in this example yet another excellent miniature comparative case study. Its capacity to reveal the differences between the two larger paradigms is remarkable. As Jullien noted, one could see clearly that for Machiavelli, “this is no more than a remark in passing.” Machiavelli offers no elaboration. His observation carries no implications and no conceptual support. It is just a single remark among others. In other words, one could see plainly how “what Western strategy merely notes in passing, Chinese thinkers try to interpret and use as food for thought.”²³

To sum up: As presented by Jullien, the Chinese approach seems to be at least *prima facie* a serious alternative to the Western one. In the light of Clausewitz’s analysis, an analysis paradigmatic for the entire question of strategy, three problems plague the Western approach:²⁴ It “strives after determinate quantities,” “whereas in war all calculation has to be made with varying quantities”; is focused exceedingly on “material forces,” while “all action in war is permeated by spiritual and moral forces and effects”; and, finally, it tends to take into consideration only “the action of one of the combatants, while war entails a constant state of reciprocal action.” Following Jullien’s argument, these three problems are a nonissue from the Chinese perspective: the potential of a situation is variable; “it cannot be pre-determined or quantified” since “it proceeds from continuous adaptation”; the strategic assessments aimed at identifying the potential are “adept at combining spiritual and physical features”; and, finally, the dimension of reciprocity lies at the very heart of what constitutes the potential of a situation that is “thought of in terms of interaction and polarity, just as any other process is.”²⁵ The result is a way of thought that seems not to be structurally plagued by the theory-practice tension and that thus avoids “the inevitable inferiority ascribed to practice as opposed to theory, which has hitherto crippled Western theory.” In short, it does not have to cope with “friction” and also does not have to appeal to “chance,” or “genius.” The cost is that the very notion of action becomes problematic. One could see, writes Jullien, how ancient Chinese strategists “never conceived of efficacy on the basis of action, as an identifiable entity, but regarded it as a transformation.” Thus following the logic of comparative analysis, we are forced to confront point blank what Jullien calls “the Western myth of action.”²⁶ The West has a penchant to see things in terms of action. At the roots of this propensity are the Greeks, who thought of natural transformation on the model of human action. However, the Chinese tradition has a penchant to see human action as a natural transformation. Not only that, the ancient Chinese tradition “never developed a cult of action—either heroic or tragic—but also, more radically, it never chose to interpret reality in terms of action.” Greek nature “fabricates,” Chinese sage “transforms.” “In the ways that the Greeks and the Chinese respectively thought about efficacy, the former in

terms of action, the latter in terms of transformation, the referents are reversed.”²⁷ Things thus come full circle: strategic thinking is embodied in a worldview. Different worldviews imply different notions of efficacy and strategy.

And thus, Jullien’s work leads masterfully toward a truly comparative strategy framework. Two parallel paradigms are articulated. In China, efficacy is effective through adaptation; in the West, through action. In Chinese thinking it is determined by an exploitation of the potential implied by the given situation. In the West, efficacy is the result of application, “a deliberate construction designed to exert pressure on things so as to bring about the desired end.” The simplicity and elegance of the comparative formula is remarkable. When “strategy” consists of allowing oneself to be carried along by the evolution of the situation, while adapting to the effects resulting from the potential of that situation, “there is no longer any need to choose (between means) or to struggle in order to attain an end.” Thus, the Western difficulties ensuing from the logic of the theory-practice, model-reality dichotomy, and plaguing the works of so many Western thinkers on strategy, seem to be at least in part avoided. Chinese thought on efficacy might not be able to solve those difficulties, yet it might manage to sidestep them and “thanks to the displacement that it occasions, allow us to perceive the reasons for those difficulties more clearly.”²⁸

Foundational Challenges

Jullien’s tour de force in the comparative history of strategic thinking is impressive by any standards. By forcing us to consider two different modes of efficacy resulting from two different logics—one based on the relation of means to ends, the other based on the relation between conditions-and-consequence—he compels us to rethink our deepest assumptions about human action and strategy. The result is that his argument brings some light on a number of old puzzles, yet, at the same time, raises a lot of new questions and challenges.

The idea that traditional Chinese strategy eludes the end-means framework seems far-fetched to our Western sensibilities. A natural reaction of Jullien’s readers is to confront his argument with the point that even if one is adapting a process view of strategy, instrumental reason still remains operational. In other words, we may accept the idea of the ineluctability of processes and the notion that to be strategic is to be able to profit from them, but it is very easy to point out that the very nature of repositioning and intelligently adapting to a process implies instrumental decisions. For instance, a battle may be seen as a process but it is a process that consists of a series of decisions. One may adopt the notion that a general exploits the potential of a situation by using his men the same way one gets logs or stones to roll. Logs remain immobile on a level surface and move on a sloping one. In the simile the potential is the slope. Troops are like logs. Yet to position troops like logs on a slope is a decision. It implies a plan with objectives and marching orders and requires an effort to adjust the reality of the mass of soldiers according to them. In the end, even the decision to adopt the process versus the action paradigm implies an instrumental dimension as one paradigm is judged as being better for guiding action than the other. To sum up: extirpating the means-ends and the theory-practice dichotomies seems quasi-impossible and, despite its subtlety and force, Jullien’s analysis fails to convince our deeply ingrained sense of instrumentality. So, in the end, the question is: How deep is the difference between the two paradigms?

One way to deal with this issue is to think in terms of ideal types. In its purest form, Western strategy assumes an unadulterated action or intervention, a restless and ongoing effort of imposing plans and ideas on reality. In its purest form, Chinese strategy is absolutely

contemplative. Strategic moves are just mental. The mind of the strategist adjusts to the changing circumstances, redefining and repositioning itself in function of them. Hence a paradox: nonmovement is the best movement. Or, as Jullien explains, “do nothing and nothing will be left undone.” Yet, instead of seeing them as two polar approaches of radically different natures, they may be seen as two extremes on a continuum, two ideal types defining the boundaries of a broader conceptual space. If that is the case, then they are to be seen more than anything else as conceptual tools aimed to orient the strategist in the decision space. From this perspective, real-life strategy is a combination of both types of approaches, in different degrees, in function of circumstances and, indeed, in function of the biases of the decision maker in point. For some people, the strategic decision may be shaped more by a means-ends, theory-practice perspective, for others, it may be shaped more by a process, conditions-and-consequences perspective. Neither of the two is correct in itself. If there is a general criterion to be considered, that criterion is defined by success in practice and that success is circumstantially determined. But even if defining the two approaches as ideal types alleviates the tension between them, the list of questions and challenges created by their mere existence side by side is far from over.

For instance, while engaged in a comparative assessment, Jullien claims that “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.”²⁹ This seems, mildly put, an exaggeration. In fact, one may legitimately point out that the technical way of thinking and the technology of warfare brought overwhelming superiority to the West. That is indeed a historical reality. The means-ends, instrumental, and technological paradigm has proved its superiority, at least for several centuries now. But a question remains: what happens when the technology gap is closed? The diffusion of technology is a fact of life. What are the strategic implications of the moment when the asymmetry of technological power gets erased? The answer seems straightforward: when the technological factor is neutralized, pure strategy becomes important again. How one thinks about strategic moves (as opposed to thinking about and organizing material forces) again becomes central. So, even if Jullien’s claim may be exaggerated, at the end of the day he may have a point.

Conceding that point raises related questions. One of the first reactions in reading Jullien is to look instinctively for clues regarding the current strategy of the rising Chinese superpower. We hope that, using this paradigm, China’s moves or lack of moves in the geopolitical arena or on the internal reform front, or its perseverance in planting a dense global network of informers, could be more easily deciphered as applications of an enduring tradition of strategic thinking. In the millennial history of China, the last several hundred years may be just an episode, a momentary downturn followed by a relatively rapid recovery of power on the grand scale of historical time. The superiority of the West with its specific strategic thinking thus may be just a brief moment in time. In what measure the Chinese have the advantage given by a strategic view that better positions them in relationship to the grand geopolitical evolution, and in what measure Jullien provides us with a key for understanding the power destined to be the main rival of the West, remain open questions.

Returning from the historically contingent to more foundational problems, the key challenge raised by Jullien’s work is indeed very precise: What does the existence of these parallel traditions mean for the study of comparative strategy? How much of our strategy is determined by the conceptual lenses we use? To what degree is strategy a function of perceptions and interpretive frameworks, and to what measure does it transcend those frameworks? One could easily imagine a mental experiment: in analyzing a battle one analyst sees a series of bold maneuvers based on a skillful plan. Another analyst sees the

consequences of a process started long ago, of which the battle is its fruition stage. What is the relationship between the empirical reality and the different subjective perceptions of the observers? Is, in fact, one of them the correct interpretation or explanation of facts? What criterion is required in order to determine what a correct interpretation is? An objective reality? What is then the substance of that reality? Is it given by the participant-observer? Is it the framework employed in the minds of the generals? What if one general thinks in terms of process while the other thinks in terms of theory? Is there a unifying metatheory that captures both frameworks and makes out of them a larger conceptual construct? And, if that is the case, how many such frameworks are out there? Are the Chinese and Western traditions exhausting the universe of possibilities? And even if there are no concrete historical examples, other than these two, is it possible to reconstruct, using our imagination, a set of such possible alternative paradigms based on different founding dichotomies? If yes, how many? And what are the basic concepts around which they could be built? And, finally, assuming that they could be imagined, do they have any practical relevance?

Jullien does not answer these questions and, in fact, does not even explicitly formulate most of them. Yet, they are all implicit in his remarkable work. And this is a great achievement. By wisely applying a form of “indirect strategy,” Jullien has opened up new intellectual horizons. Within those horizons one may be able to find for strategic studies an alternative to the attempts to reduce strategy to a quasiscience, with laws and regularities, a science ready to be packaged as a mass consumption intellectual good. The originality of Jullien’s thought is thus paradoxical: to have found a striking depth in alleged truisms, to have dug deeper into what may seem self-evident—the strategic assumptions of two different civilizations—and, thus, to boldly reformulate the problem of the multiplicity of frameworks that give meaning to strategic thinking. While doing that, Jullien has also confronted us with a surprising externality: an elegant but forceful re-enchantment of the very notion of strategy.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by J. J. Graham (London: Penguin Books, 1968, 1982).
2. Ibid.; François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), pp. 10–14.
3. Carl von Clausewitz, bk. I, ch. 7.
4. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, pp. 12–14.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. Ibid., p. 3.
7. Ibid., p. 11.
8. Ibid., p. 12.
9. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
10. Ibid., p. 16.
11. François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, translated by Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, MA: Distributed by MIT Press, 1995), pp. 39–75; François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, pp. 84–89.
12. François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, translated by Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, MA: Distributed by MIT Press, 2000), pp. 7–35.
13. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 16.
14. François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, pp. 25–39; François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 3.

15. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 16.
16. Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York, Oxford University Press, 1963).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
18. Carl von Clausewitz, bk. I, ch. 1.
19. François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, pp. 25–28.
20. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 20.
21. Niccoló Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, translated by Ellis Farnsworth (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), bk. IV.
22. *Ibid.*, bk. VI.
23. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 22.
24. Carl von Clausewitz, bk. II, ch. 2.
25. François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, p. 265; François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 24.
26. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, p. 50.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 24.