“TO KILL THE HORSE TO REACH THE HORSEMAN” CHINA’S RHETORIC OF OBLIQUITY

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Abstract

Chinese high tradition of theory concerning military strategy stresses the importance of avoiding direct, frontal attack. “Obliquity” represents the ways and means to deprive one’s opponent of the possibility, even the thought, of confrontation. While it is a process unknown to Ancient Greek, hence Western, military tradition it also explains how Western rhetoric of confrontation of viewpoints and frontal debate is foreign to the Chinese practice of persuasion. Transposed to international relations, obliquity poses a serious challenge as it pitches a philosophy and a practice of persuasive manoeuvring against modes of rhetorical deliberation Western-framed diplomacy deems natural and obvious and, possibly, the only valid ones.

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Military strategy was much more than a specific technique in ancient China. It reflected some of the most radical elements of Chinese thought and informed many other disciplines when elaborated into theory. If there is one basic principle on which all ancient Chinese military treatises insist, it is that of avoiding direct confrontation with an armed enemy. A frontal clash, in which two armies are engaged face-to-face, was always considered eminently risky and destructive. The whole art of war was crafted with the intention of depriving the other of his ability to defend himself and undermining him from within, even before the confrontation took place, so that at the moment of confrontation the enemy collapsed of his own accord. "To carry one hundred victories for every hundred battles," wrote one of the oldest masters of the art of war, "is not an end in itself, whereas to subjugate the enemy without having engaged in combat is the height of excellence" (Mou gong pian, *Sunzi bingfa*) "The best general is he whose merits one does not even dream of praising, since he vanquishes an already defeated enemy" (Xing pian, *Sunzi bingfa*). Rather than glorifying the battle, the art of war taught how to triumph by avoiding battle altogether.

Strategy also consisted in attacking the enemy's plans, or ideas, rather than his troops by physical force. The best strategist was the one always able to anticipate the course of events, the one who could situate himself before their conception and thereby thwart maneuvers as the enemy planned them. Conversely, the worst way to engage in battle was to end up in a face-to-face immobilisation of armies, such as a siege. Such cases lessened initiative and lost flexibility. It is hardly surprising, then, that Chinese theorists of military strategy advise not the destruction of the enemy (for this would deprive him of his resources, which are better to use to one's own advantage) but his *destructuration. By* striking at the level of the "brain" rather than at deployed forces, the good strategist inhibited his enemy; it was enough for him to deprive the enemy of his ability to react, to paralyze his movements. This is why he who "dexterously handles his troops ... subjugates the enemy without combat and takes his positions without attack" (Mou gong pian, *Sinzi bingfa*). The internal disintegration to which the adversary was initially subjected precluded the necessity of confronting him later: such an enemy was always immediately vanquished, since he was continuously disabled.

Two pairs of concepts underlie this theory of thwarting at the core of ancient Chinese military writings: the "direct" versus the "oblique" and the "straight" versus the "circuitous." The first pair has an essentially strategic function, while the second is more limited to the description of tactical operations. But, whatever the application, the resource exploited by Chinese military art always rests on the relationship of direct and indirect. When manoeuvring troops, it might be just as advisable to make the enemy's advances excessively long and tortuous, so as to exhaust him, by luring him with false bait as to make one's own progress circuitous and keep one's plans secret in order to surprise the enemy (Jun zheng pian and Jiu di pian, *Sunzi bingfa*). Similarly, the most general strategy can be summed up as follows: "an encounter takes place frontally, while victory is gained obliquely" (Shi pian, *Sunzi bingfa*). According to a series of commentators, "frontally" signifies not only facing the enemy but doing so in a normal, ordinary, predictable way. Similarly, "obliquely" means not only approaching from the side but doing so in an extraordinary way: unexpected by the enemy, reaching him when he is least prepared. The attack is indirect, operating in secret.

But even in such explicit terms, the distinction remains too crude, for it imagines the opposition from the outside without taking into account the internal differences between the two processes. Another treatise from Antiquity allows us to penetrate more deeply into the logic of this correlation by placing it within a more general perspective of the way things come about: "When [something] that has occurred and assumed a shape corresponds to [something] that has likewise assumed a shape, we have a frontal relationship; but when, without having assumed a shape, [this] reacts to [that which] has assumed a shape, then we have an oblique relationship" (Qizheng, *Sun Bin bingfa*). If I make this statement more specific by relating it to the military arts and to operations on the ground, then positioning one's troops in response to the enemy's position would represent a frontal relationship, whereas dominating the adversary's troops' position without taking a position would represent an oblique relationship. In other words, through the absence of positioning, I control the positioning of the enemy. In the frontal relationship, the two realities that "correspond to each other" are limited by their concrete and specific characteristics; at the same time, each offers the other a hold on it by allowing itself to be seen as identifiable, as a target. It is easy to define, by way of contrast, the oblique relationship and what characterises its superiority: that is, what has not yet occurred and taken concrete form benefits from possible expedients and escapes the outside assessment that might allow for opposition. In operating on the virtual level, the oblique relationship makes it possible to keep one's initiative intact while remaining un-attackable. This is why the oblique relationship upsets the enemy's manoeuvres.

The same treatise asserts that, insofar as one adversary is the same as the other, the one cannot triumph over the other; therefore, the relationship in which one differs most from the other constitutes, in a figurative and purely trajectorial way, an "oblique" relationship which allows one to overpower the other. This treatise also represents the differences at play as an opposition of stages: "the stage of deployment represents a frontal relationship, the stage that precedes deployment is the oblique relationship" (Qizheng, *Sun Bin bingfa*). If we follow the logic of this remark as far as it will go, we end up with something that seems a paradox but represents the most profound intuition: "When the oblique relationship is in effect, not to respond [in kind] makes a victory possible." Indeed, if the enemy attacks me obliquely, it is by responding frontally that I neutralise him. To maintain my oblique capacity, I must renew the oblique through the frontal relationship and not immobilise myself in it. As a Tang emperor [Taizong] explained, the art of war "consists in creating a frontal relationship from an oblique relationship in such a way that the enemy, seeing it as a frontal relationship, allows me to surprise him obliquely and likewise creating an oblique relationship from a frontal relationship in such a way that the enemy, seeing it as an oblique relationship, allows me to attack him frontally" (Shi pian, *Sunzi bingfa*). Thus by countering frontally he who thinks to surprise me obliquely, I take him obliquely. As the above passage concludes, the victor will always be the one with a "surplus of oblique moves" (that is, the one with "one more" oblique move "left over";Qizheng, *Sun Bin bingfa*). In other words, as the first treatise cited maintains, he who is apt to "produce an oblique move" is as "inexhaustible" as "the heavens and the earth" (in their continual renewal) and as "unfailing" as the "streams and rivers" (Shi pian, *Sunzi bingfa*). This "surplus of oblique moves" thus captures most precisely the content of the strategic principles mentioned above: to preserve the initiative while the enemy is crippled and to remain impenetrable.

Under the influence of Western thought, twentieth-century Chinese philosophers have described the conceptual relationship at work here (as well as in the other great dyads in Chinese thought, such as rest and movement, modification and continuity) as dialectical – in the Hegelian-Marxist sense. But clearly, the two types of relationships opposed, frontal and oblique, never lead to anything other than themselves (and thus never transcend their opposition) – they also never cease to converge and, in so doing, renew themselves. One intuition at the core of Chinese thought is the concept that everything that actualises itself through opposition always latently contains its opposite, so that opposites, by remaining linked, alternate between themselves; hence, an uninterrupted dynamism flows from their reversion. The theorist of military strategies contemplates the constant renewal of this dynamism in the great disposition of the world, through the incessant comings and goings of the sun and the moon and the changing of seasons. It is this dynamism that the strategist will reproduce, to his advantage, on the battlefield, for the ability to function through immanence is the same in both cases. It is therefore enough for him to allow the strategic arrangement to operate only through the frontal or the oblique attack. Just as sounds, colours, and smells "are all five in number," according to the traditional Chinese nomenclature, but "are never ending in their variations" the "strategic potential" always rests on these two possibilities alone, though the variations obtained through them are inexhaustible. Such serial continuity is illustrated by the figure of the ring: "oblique and frontal relationships engender each other, like a ring forever following itself, with no head and no tail; who could ever reach the end?" (Shi pian, *Sunzi bingfa*).

Through continuous conversion, the frontal and oblique approaches are equally necessary to permitting the *endless* renewal of strategic potential. But we also have seen that of the two, the oblique is preponderant, since it functions through both relationships, with the frontal gaining its validity through the oblique. As a classical war veteran noted, it is always through an oblique relationship that victory is achieved: when I attack frontally, it is to surprise my enemy's oblique approach with an oblique approach of my own. Hence, since it always situates me on a level prior to actualisation, the oblique relationship allows me to manipulate the other as I please, while remaining unfathomable myself. Moreover, inasmuch as I always retain an oblique move as a "leftover" – because of the unending alternation between one approach and the other – my ability to attack remains intact and my potential inexhaustible. This strategic concept, formulated quasi-definitively in the fifth and sixth centuries of Chinese Antiquity, has ceaselessly been reformulated and commented on, to the point that it has become proverbial and seems no longer to require justification. In the twentieth century, Mao referred to it once again in his military treatises (which remain, in my opinion, the best part of his oeuvre and greatly illuminate his political conduct): to conquer the enemy, one must first disorient him, "make noise in the east to attack in the west" (Mao Zedong 1965, II, 79). The whole of Chinese military strategy can be summed up in this oblique phrase.

I would like to make these concepts come alive and shake up the context in which they have usually been contained by briefly comparing them with what the ancient-military scholars John Keegan and Victor Davis Hanson (1990) have described as the Western model of war. This model is thought to have been almost definitively formulated by the ancient Greeks. But the concept it puts forth is diametrically opposed to the Chinese model, because it rests on directly facing the enemy in pitched battle. Around the seventh century B.C., the conduct of war in Greece underwent profound changes: gone were the days of skirmishes and ambushes, the one-on-one confrontations between enraged heroes of the sort Homer sang about. A new structure was put into place – the phalanx – according to which two bodies of heavily armed and cuirassed hoplites, arranged in lines one behind the other and marching in step to the rhythm of the fife, advanced in tight formation, with no possibility of fleeing. This face-to-face could lead only to a massive and destructive clash, for the sole effort of these men on each side was in the "thrust" *(ôthismos);* the first ranks, which directly sustained – the enemy's charge, were supported by the accumulated pressure of the ranks behind them. Indeed, the deeper the column and the tighter its ranks, the better it weighed on the enemy and the more striking its power and momentum.

Hanson has demonstrated that what might appear pure carnage in this frontal clash corresponds to a principle of economy: reducing the ravages of a protracted war, which spares neither goods nor families in the "all or nothing of the pitched battle": to obtain, through a brief and direct confrontation between the political bodies that represent cities, the quickest and least equivocal decision possible. This is why adversaries engaged in combat, according to the rules, by setting the rigid order of the phalanx into motion on an exposed site cleared of obstacles and agreed on by both parties. Disdained were the dilatory operations in which dodging and harassing were alternately used to tire the enemy out, since their circuitousness diluted the rapidity and definitiveness of the single assault. Moreover, all arms that were used from afar or by surprise, such as arrows and javelins, were rejected in favour of lances, which were the arm par excellence of face-to-face combat. "The Greeks thought," Polybius explains, "that it was only a hand-to-hand battle at close quarters which was truly decisive" (Polybius 1976, 13.3). Skill in manoeuvres became less important; all that really mattered was the courage exhibited at the crucial moment. As such, weakening the enemy in advance was not even attempted: Agesilas decided, Xenophon states, that it was better to let one's enemies regroup, no matter their number, and "allow the two hostile forces to come together, in case they wished to fight, to conduct the battle in regular fashion and in the open" (Xenophon 1921, 6.5). Taken to such an extreme, Greek military strategy offers a sharp contrast with Chinese military strategy: the Greeks would have resolutely ignored the infinite expedients of oblique confrontation, relying instead on the violent clash of a victorious or fatal encounter. On the one side, we have mass weight, on the other, the strategy of detour: physical pressure is opposed to the art of thwarting. The Greek model of war, Hanson explains, did not die with the Greeks. Americans, who, in Vietnam, were put in the impossible position of engaging in a confrontation of this type, were the most recent prisoners of this ancient heritage.

<To clarify this point: let us> not imagine that the Greeks were unaware of the expedients of detour or were not cunning. Their taste for stratagems is well documented. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1974) have brilliantly demonstrated the importance to them of *mçtis,* or cunning intelligence, with which the gods themselves were richly endowed and which combines "intuition," "foresight,"

"feint," "various skills," and "a sense of opportunity." It is nonetheless important to note that it was not by deliberately resorting to *mçtis* that the Greeks regulated their armed conflicts. More importantly still, the kind of intelligence manifested in this taste for detour, this *agnkulomçtçs,* "always appeared more or less 'submerged,'" Detienne and Vernant explain, "immersed in a practice that never seeks, even as it uses it, to explain its nature or to justify its actions" (Detienne and Vernant 1974, 9). Unlike Chinese obliqueness, mçtis remains in the shadows of reason, appearing clearly only in myth. Repressed by speculative thought, it is not the object of any Greek theory (Raphals 1992).

This comment on *mçtis* deserves to be generalised, since it allows us to understand that the comparison just outlined remains tentative because it draws a parallel between military strategies (among the Chinese) and a way of enacting war, not of thinking about it, as the Greek historians have reported it. I have not made this comparison more rigorously, simply because there are no Greek military strategy texts on this subject that are comparable to the Chinese treatises. Certainly, there is an abundant literature on Greek military *technç*, but this is never philosophical (nor has it influenced, to my knowledge, other areas of Greek thought). Moreover, the Hellenists do not seem concerned to exploit it (as proof, there are the largely undeveloped treatises of Aelianus and Arrian). One might go so far as to ask: What would be the specifically strategic interest of a theory of war that favoured frontal confrontation and shunned the infinite expedients of the oblique? (Or to take it one step further: Does the thought of even a Carl von Clausewitz, recognised as the greatest theorist of war in Europe, constitute a work on strategy?)

Furthermore, the Greek texts that focus only on tactics lead one to refine the model of confrontation elaborated by Hanson rather than to question it. In Asclepiodotus's succinct and almost mathematical description of the phalanx, he envisions an "oblique" arrangement *(lochos)* as opposed to a "frontal" formation (*plagia, orthia),* but he does not draw any conclusions on this subject. Aeneas the tactician occasionally advises not to confront the adversary immediately but to wait until, emboldened by the deviation, he begins to let down his guard. He also recommends that one know how to create a diversion the better to attack the adversary by surprise and that one not neglect secret sallies or other cunning means (spying and disinformation existed in Greece, and people have been wrong to consider them Chinese attributes; Gerolymatos 1986). But although this practice of detour was always present in Greek strategy, unlike in China it was considered a last resort. One can very well give such advice, but the Greek concept of war was not based on these concepts. Detienne's work on the phalanx confirms the importance of the Greek style of confrontation all the more because it allows us to see the direct link between the phalanx and the organisation of the city. There is even a homology between the structure of the two: through the uniformity of equipment, the equivalence of positions, and even the types of required behaviour, the foot soldiers of the phalanx were reduced to "interchangeable elements" that corresponded exactly to their position as citizens in the egalitarian framework of political life (Detienne 1968). It therefore appears that the phalanx, and with it the logic of a frontal approach, could indicate a choice of Greek culture. Let us, then, see if the comparison can be drawn out further and if what we have demonstrated with the phalanx can orient us toward a more general opposition.

I hazard a question: Does this face-to-face confrontation of phalanxes on the battlefield have an equivalent in the face-to-face discussion around which the city was organised? I use the word "equivalent" and not merely "analogy"; the *aqonistic* structure of armed confrontation also existed in the organisation of the theatre (tragedy or comedy), the tribunal, and the assembly. Indeed, whether in the dramatic, the judicial, or the political realm, the debate manifested itself like a force pressing for or against something, in which the upper hand was gained only by the sheer strength and number of arguments either side amassed. Hence, if there is homology between the phalanx and the city, it is not only because they shared participants (as citizen-soldiers) but also because their structures caused them both to make decisions in the same way. We just saw how the confrontation of phalanxes strove to obtain a decision as quickly and unequivocally as possible; the face-to-face arguments at the heart of antithetical discussions, as the Greeks conceived of them, whether in the theatre, the tribunal, or the assembly, had the same end in mind. Orators made their cases in front of each other, in full view and knowledge of everyone and in a limited timeframe, and every witness could draw his own conclusions. This antagonistic thrust in either direction would then be translated into a majority vote. In this respect, the face-to-face confrontation of speeches is tightly bound to the Western democratic organisation. (To convince ourselves of this point, we need merely consider the importance of televised debates in modern political life.) Hence, we might ask: To what extent does the privilege that the Chinese tradition accords the oblique approach thwart the democratic process in China today? (And, more ironically, when will the candidates for power in China confront each other in organised debates?) Although contrary to Western ideology, in which voting and freedom are so closely associated, it seems to me that decision making arrived at by a simple vote would *logically* have difficulty taking root in a political system dominated by obliqueness.

The face-to-face confrontation of arguments, which Westerners take for granted, is therefore not as obvious as one might think. It underlines, like the vote that is its culmination, a cultural circumstance that, in comparison with China, appears rather particular. One might therefore assert the principle: while an isolated argument frees UP ideas, two antithetical arguments, by opposing ideas, bind them all the closer. And we know, at least in general, the origin of oratorical debate *(agôn logôn),* as it was established in Greece in the fifth century B.C. Clearly, one tradition began with Protagoras, who not only attempted, according to Aristotle, "to make the weakest of two arguments the strongest" but also conceived of the idea that "for any question there exist two discourses or two contrary arguments." "He was the first to say that everything had two opposing arguments" (Diogenes Laertius 1938, 9.51). Clement of Alexandria confirms this: "The Greeks claim after Protagoras, that in regard to any discourse there exists another that is opposed to it" (Clement of Alexandria 1999, 6.65) From this principle follows, to a great extent, the Western conception of *loqos.* If an opposite position can always be argued, the art of debate, which developed simultaneously with the formation of reason, would essentially consist in advancing arguments opposed to those presented and making them more persuasive.

It is quite evident, since Greek orators made such frequent use of it, what this discursive procedure of confrontation consists in. Among the means most frequently used to reverse an argument, the simplest is refutation, which consists in showing that the adversary's argument is erroneous; there is also compensation, which attempts to annul the adversary's argument, and reversal, where one demonstrates that what an adversary thought to be in his favour is, in fact, not in his favour or is favourable to us (which is accomplished by twisting his argument). Whatever the route taken, the whole art consists in sticking as close as possible to the opposing arguments (and reusing the adversary's facts, words, and ideas as much as possible) while arriving at opposite conclusions. As Jacqueline de Romilly has clearly shown about Thucydides' antilogies, the responding argument in this verbal confrontation must align itself strictly to that to which it is responding *(logos para logon;* and in an opening argument, the orator must anticipate the arguments that will be thrown back at him) in such a way that each speech provides the closest possible argumentation (*logoi antikatateinantes,* as Thucydides calls it: these "discourses" are "hurled forcefully against each other"; De Romilly 1956, 180ff). I think that one can even formulate an essential principle of *logos,* as it originated in Greece, based on the functioning of antilogy, thereafter aim of *logos* is to grasp its object as closely as possible. Inversely, the aim of Chinese expression (characterised by *wen) is,* by oblique means, to achieve suppleness and elusiveness, to keep the grip "slack" to maintain an allusive distance to the object in view.

This figure of confrontation highlights the nature of the antag*onistic* thrust. Inevitably, certain tactical aspects discussed earlier re-emerge. Once two lists enumerating the advantages on two sides of an argument have been established like two opposing phalanxes, one settles the question merely "by saying which *list is* longer or presents greater advantages." The comparison (and the ensuing decision) will be all the more probing and swift when its elements are similar. The isonomic principle in the structure of the phalanx thus appears just as necessary. The rigor of antilogy tends "to transform all the elements of argumentation into comparable givens, subject to addition or subtraction, and thus interchangeable"; one arranges the arguments in facing units, "as one does with numbers" (De Romilly 1956, 225). Confrontation and calculation are thus the basis of this conflict of words, and it is always by *surplus* – of arguments presented, not of secret obliqueness – that a victory is won. "So," Thucydides has one of his Peloponnesian leaders, facing an enemy, say, "when you think of their greater experience you must also think of your own greater courage, and when you feel frightened because of the defeat you have suffered, you must remember that at that time you were caught off your guard and unprepared. There are solid advantages on your side – you have the bigger fleet: you are fighting off your own native shores" (Thucydides 1954, 2.87). "Here," notes De Romilly, "the same words describe the two parallel columns *(antitaxasthç),* making it possible to see the arithmetical conclusions clearly: the neutral comparatives correspond well to the advantages of either side" (De Romilly 1956, 227). The arguments are thus evaluated like weighed quantities. It is also revealing on this point that the same Greek term, *logiksesthai,* means both *to think and to count.*

Thus, the organised face-to-face confrontation of arguments was more than rhetorical play for the Greeks. It was a veritable intellectual instrument. Sustaining or turning an argument around, proceeding via thesis and antithesis appeared the best method to bring out, before a listener, the sought-after truth. Later, the very strict, and thus very rigid, treatment of antilogy, which one finds in all the fifth-century genres – not only in oratory but also in drama and the writing of history – became much more supple. In transforming itself, this *antilogy* would lead, notably, to the philosophical *dialogue,* for pure antilogy as an exercise risked giving the impression that all things could be defended equally and, in this way, could become morally dangerous or lead to scepticism. Furthermore, the procedure, as Plato criticises it in *The Republic* (1.348A), implies continual and successive arguments and requires the presence of a third party to act as judge. This antithetical construction of discourse will not, consequently, be constantly reworked and is destined from the start to the endless adventures of dialectic. But in this face-to-face antagonism, can we not detect not simply a point of departure but a chosen *position* continuously at work in Western logic?

The characteristics of military art described above should serve as illustrations. I have begun by accentuating the distance between Chinese and Greek cultures to try to establish a more general alternative (one that might be of use within both a Western and a Chinese framework) – the goal being to gain a better perception of what the economics of meaning rests on, as well as to explore the broadest range of its possibilities. (I am conscious of saying *meaning* in the singular: the effect of meaning, even the most exotic, is something that *becomes* intelligible to us.) Thus, I was led to presume that the invention and the perfecting of antithetical discourse in classical Greece found its counterpoint in the confrontation of phalanxes on the battlefield. At the same time, an occasion arose to test a metaphor: that of the strategy of meaning.

Indeed, even in its vocabulary, Greek rhetoric encourages us to imagine the confrontation of arguments in terms of battle (De Romilly 1956, 226). This is all the more obvious among the Chinese. A military expression turned proverb – "to kill the horse to reach the horseman" – is still widely used in Chinese political life to recommend indirectly criticising a leader through his subordinates (the defensive formulation being the opposite: "to abandon the horse and carriage to protect the general"). Another common expression, still used as we saw by Mao in his thoughts on guerrilla warfare – "make noise in the east to attack in the west" -also applies to discourse. On one side are explicit statements that serve only as diversions (for example, in the official press, the redundant use of set formulas); on the other side is the nuance that dissimulates the polemical charge beneath this cover. This tactical expression finds its perfect homology in another formula that applies only to the art of verbal attack: "to point at the chicken to insult the dog" (or "to point at the mulberry to insult the sophora"). One thing is said to indicate another: the *one* is merely an occasion for detour -and, as such, openly manifested – with the aim of reaching the *other* secretly.

Thus, the obliquity recommended in the art of war corresponds to an obliquity in speech. We can complete the picture while continuing to rely on this single contrast: to the thrust of the hand-to-hand or face-to-face confrontation of soldiers or arguments the Chinese prefer detour, which frees up the field for manoeuvres, the crafty tactics that will rout the enemy without exposing oneself. Dodging and harrying are once again the goal: instead of presenting arguments so clearly that the other can retort, I use a circuitous expression, which allows me to dodge any frontal attack that might require self-justification while working as my defence. At the same time, I can harry an opponent ceaselessly by threatening him through allusion – thus pressuring him by insinuation. As in military strategy, in verbal confrontation the subtlety of the oblique approach opens the way to infinite games of manipulation. A good military strategist, as we saw, anticipated the unfolding of events and was better able to dominate his adversary's position for not having taken a position himself. Likewise, criticism gains by evoking the purely suggestive, inchoate stage of the statement, since a lightly sketched affirmation does not force me to defend a position but rather allows me to evolve as I will, while remaining master of the game; the adversary is forced to depend on my taking the verbal initiative and is therefore reduced to passivity. This sort of ever-emerging meaning is all the more menacing since it is never clear where we are heading. And this barely sketched criticism is all the more dangerous because it never exposes itself, thereby avoiding any grounds for refutation. <Therefore> there is more than a simple parallel between the obliquity of discourse and that of military strategy: both relate to the same economy and contain the same logical justifications.

Let us examine how Liang Shiqiu, a Chinese scholar from the beginning of the twentieth century who was a great translator of Shakespeare, depicted the "art of the invective" (an expression that has become popular in China). On returning from the United States (the land of "direct talk"), he wrote a few pages perhaps responding to a need to justify the indirect. After a few general considerations, Liang begins the fourth paragraph, titled "Strike from the Side and Attack Obliquely" as follows:

> *If someone steals from you and you say, in accusing him, that he is a thief, or if someone robs you and you say, in accusation, that he is a bandit, this is stupid. When one wants to accuse someone, one must first put into practice the art of the empty and the full, the veil and the reflection; one should therefore suggest indirectly and approach laterally, strike from the side and attack obliquely: when you have arrived at the crucial point, you will need but a single word to finish him off and your opponent, as they say, will have a knife to his throat* (Liang Shiqiu 1894).

As in Chinese military art, victory can be won before the first battle takes place, before the first words of the argument are spoken (when one, begins to fight, the enemy is already defeated; when one releases a word, it is the coup de grace for the adversary). The efficacy of the invective thus originates in the condition in which the adversary is placed beforehand and is expressed, naturally, in terms of military strategy. Among the titles in Liang's commentary, we find, in addition to the one mentioned above, "Conquering by Withdrawing" and "Preparing Ambushes." At the same time, this terminology of military operations is mixed with aesthetic terms: "full" and "empty" not only are opposed in the, theory of military strategy, with points of resistance being full and those of penetration, or gaps, being empty; they also evoke, in the language of painting, the fecund relationship between the fullness of the line and the whiteness of the paper that surrounds and animates it. Similarly, "reflection" and "veil" designate the discreet art of suggestion, which leaves things transparent or masks them and never gives us more than a glimpse. Military strategy and aesthetics are <therefore> closely related. Just as strategic potential never ceases to be transformed by alternation, the aesthetic potential continuously renews itself by a variation between presence and evanescence, manifestation and retreat. The critique constantly oscillates between the explicit and the implicit, just as the art of war oscillates between frontal and oblique attacks.

The efficacy of each stems from the same principle. If one begins with a reproach, everything has already been said; there is nothing more to add, unless one exploits the Greek method mentioned above and engages in a formal demonstration. Speech becomes closed to further development; it has no future and, by betraying its limitations, becomes sterile. Meanwhile, the adversary already knows what he is up against and so has nothing to worry about: in exposing oneself, one is deprived of all resources, while the other gains the means to defend himself. This is precisely what the strategy of detour mitigates: by keeping critical signification purely suggestive and inchoate, it prolongs its virtuality, thereby preserving its offensive capacity as long as possible. Furthermore, the adversary is pressured with something that is not localised in time or space, as in the frontal attack, but prolonged and diffused – all encompassing and invasive. One suspects that this evasive strategy in speech is much more than an art of litotes. <By> refusing the fireworks of direct statement, spectacular but immediately depleted, one acquires the possibility of transforming the antagonistic relationship (in which the adversaries are face-to-face and on an equal footing) into a process whose unfolding, by giving more room to manoeuvre, opens up obliquity's infinite resources. By insinuating suspicion, provoking anxiety, one disables the other.

In the art of invective, therefore, <reside> two characteristics central to Chinese military strategy. The oblique approach gives the one who is criticising, like the one who is fighting, a means not to expose <oneself>, a means to remain unfathomable, while rendering his power of attack inexhaustible. By always having something else to say in reserve, criticism, alternating moments when the innuendo is more direct with moments when it is more veiled, works on the principle of endless oscillation: it can continue to snake back and forth, never reaching the end of its meanderings.

<By way of conclusion, we now> grasp the tenor of this detour: the *oblique approach* in military strategy becomes the *implicit* in discourse; the *obliquity* of the trajectory leads to a *depth* of meaning. <In consequence> we should not be surprised that the discussion of the art of invective is followed by praise of the implicit. Liang illuminates this strategy from the inside:

> *When one inveighs against someone, it must be done in an infinitely subtle manner, and its meaning must remain implicit. The other should not at first notice that he is being insulted; only after a certain amount of reflection should he progressively realize that these words were not well intentioned, in such a way that his face, which was at first smiling, goes from white to red, and from red to purple, and then, from purple to grey. This is the highest level of the art of invective* (Liang Shiqiu 1894).

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