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Thinking between China and Greece

Breaking New Ground

An Interview with Marcel Gauchet

FRANÇOIS JULLIEN

Translated by Simon Porzak

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MARCEL GAUCHET: You’ve reached a turning point in your career: you’ve thrown yourself into a new cycle of studies, the first volume of which has just been released: *If Speaking Goes without Saying: On Logos or Other Last Resorts* [*Si parler va sans dire, Du logos ou d’autres ressources*] (Seuil, 2006). What led you to relaunch your project? And what does the whole of this new undertaking consist of?

FRANÇOIS JULLIEN: Let’s recapitulate: my work might give the impression of a succession of books with quite diverse titles, with an internal articulation that’s not always clear. But basically I’ve been writing one book, whose different titles constitute so many chapters intended to back up and prolong each other. *One* book that finds itself commanded by a fundamental question, or more precisely an inquiry, which has led me to pass through China—but without leaving Greece behind. The entire project is effectively borne by this uneasiness—in my view, a properly philo-

sophical one—about coming to attain, in its spirit, some degree of distance. For wouldn't there be two ways of conceiving of the practice of philosophy? The first consists of ostensibly taking a position and developing theses—thesis against thesis; the second consists of swimming upstream so as to bring to light the implicit choices in (one's) thought—those from which one thinks and that, precisely due to that fact, are never thought—those that one puts forth as evident without thinking to interrogate them. I choose this latter path: China provides me with the means for an oblique glance at the unthought of our thought.

Because the unthought is not the false, and doubtless there's nothing more difficult for thought than turning back on itself and considering itself from without. What is put back into question, then, is what I've called, in various reprises, the pre-notioned, or the pre-categorized, or the pre-questioned, that is to say, that which constitutes our theoretical *pre-suppositions*. Hence I take off from the *exteriority* of China in regard to Europe: China is elsewhere, as much in terms of language as of history. This exteriority is established. It is not to be confused with the "other," the different, or the opposite. If there is "alterity" between China and Europe, this alterity is to be constructed, and not to be assumed.

MG: So you distinguish the *elsewhere* and the *other* [*l'ailleurs et l'autre*]?

FJ: From the outset these distinctions must be more or less clear, otherwise there is a risk of an infinite confusion that would generate vain discussions. *Elsewhere* is indeed a given: the Chinese and European worlds didn't communicate with each other until relatively recently. The *other*, as it has been known since Plato's *Sophist*, is the tool of a philosophical grammar, the necessary instrument of every dialectical elaboration. As I was just saying, the elsewhere establishes itself, while alterity or otherness, if there is any, is *to be constructed*, and here this entails an operation of reflection—reflection in the proper sense—between the two fields concerned. Thus I've given myself over precisely to this *progressive construction of alterity* between China and Europe and from essay to essay, to extract these two thoughts

from what I shall call their mutual *in-difference*—at the start they neither speak to nor even regard each other—and to constitute bit by bit the new framings and theoretical retrofittings allowing us to pinpoint the “differences” between them.

So what about “Chinese alterity”? Far from “postulating” it, I’m only able to catch hold of it and define it little by little, thread by thread, essay after essay, in essays that branch off from each other. From one essay to the next, my construction of alterity becomes more dense in its stitching and more general by its range. But it wouldn’t know how to finish itself off, to my eyes, except in terms of a trajectory. Now, this detour taken by China wouldn’t admit of an end . . . it remains *work in progress* [English in original].

MG: “Elsewhere” is not “opposite”?

FJ: Of course not, even if China is often presented to us in this category of the inverse or flipside [*envers*]. Because that way we don’t step out of our thought: since the opposite is nothing but the reversal of our position, we continue to stay at home. We aren’t displaced.

MG: But you construct oppositions nevertheless?

FJ: Let’s consider my operation more closely, from the point of view of engaged method. Indeed, how is that possible? Or, how can we knit together an encounter between two patches of thought that are ignorant of each other, as is the case with Chinese and European thought, and introduce a mediation between them? To illuminate that which, from the beginning of my developments, in reflecting itself becomes “method,” I can only invite a retracing of my trail, paying attention, once more, to these *distinguos*. Through reading the Chinese text, I progressively deploy its coherence (commentaries are helpful here), until I open it onto a question with a shared grounding, one that speaks to me in my language and concerns me, has something to do with me—this is what I will use as place and link to draw up my vis-à-vis. So I don’t oppose Chinese and European thought as two different “worlds”; rather, I *draw up* [*monte*], in the operative sense

of the word, and point by point, a vis-à-vis between them. Or rather, I don't immediately posit "contraries," but bring into play an effect of *contrast* so that the one inscribes itself regarding the other, so that the two reflect and illuminate each other.

MG: Where are you now in this work?

FJ: I attempted, in my preceding essays, to constitute theoretical objects through taking advantage of a rift between European and Chinese thought—around questions of efficacy, allusiveness, wisdom, morality, et cetera, but also questions of the Nude in art or of the "seeming without resembling" of painting, et cetera. This way I constrained myself to the elaboration of a network of brushstroke-like notions, no longer directly caught in European philosophy, nor, for that matter, thematized by China, but that could serve as concepts for the meeting of the two. For example, propensity, process, allusiveness, et cetera—or pregnancy faced with presence, the indexical faced with the symbolic, correlation faced with composition, et cetera.

I'm now starting on a new phase, wherein I'd like to try to grasp again what seems to me to constitute the stakes of European thought in regard to Chinese thought. This projected work can be recapitulated under these three terms: *logos*, *eidos*, *theos*, giving place to three books in the form of a triangle. Because I believe that through them we've touched upon the womb [*matrice*], as much ideological as philosophical, that has carried Europe to term.

MG: So this time you're taking Greek texts as a point of departure?

FJ: The idea is to reread them while putting the exterior vantage point furnished by China to work. The second book, which I'm writing right now, will have the subtitle "or Plato read from China." Not "Plato read by the Chinese." But Plato interrogated by questions he never imagined. It's a sort of exercise of the philosophical imagination. For, as I've already noted, right next to what one thinks sits that which one does not think to think. For example, Europe thought to think Being and perception, but

not respiration. And nevertheless, we breathe. . . . Now China has thought from the vantage point of respiration—of everything that is breath (*qi*), of the regulatory alternation of in and out, et cetera.

On the horizons of this research project more general questions, with ideological implications, are posed or poised, touching on the *universal* as the demand of reason, or on the *uniform*, its inverse, as a consequence of contemporary standardization, or finally on the *common*, an essentially political concept designating what is shared between civilizations. From there we can consider cultural dialogue, such as that between China and Europe.

MG: Let's take up these three themes one by one to define the individual stake attached to each of them. So, *logos* . . .

FJ: I start with and by *logos*, preliminarily, or in other words as the point of entry into this study. In determining the nature of *logos*, I continually pressed myself up against this summary-text, the *Gamma* book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which I read from end to end. Certainly, Aristotle comes after Plato, but *logos* was born from a more ancient history, and was already worked up by the Sophists. It is this stunning instrument that the Greeks perfected and that characterizes them to a large degree; Aristotle establishes its definitive mapping in the *Gamma* book.

What, for Aristotle, speaks for itself—the point seems so evident to him that he doesn't insist on it—is that speaking is saying, saying is saying “something,” and that saying something is “signifying” something. From that beginning, in a certain way, everything is said, *les jeux sont faits*. An essential line segment, running from speaking to *signifying something*, has been defined. What's important is not just that saying is necessarily thought of as signifying, but first of all that there is this “something,” this *ti*, that might be put to service as an object of speech.

I propose to put this all into question by drawing upon the Chinese *outside*, that which I haven't read inside European thought, as a possible objection to Aristotle. There are naturally enough objectors to Aristotle, even in ancient Greece: there are those cited by Aristotle himself and, for a start, Heraclitus or

Protagoras, all of those who moved in the direction of mobilism or relativism. But do these objections go all the way to throwing into question, from the outset, this “something” assigned to be object of speech? Now the consequence of all this, such as Aristotle draws it out in the *Gamma*, is the principle of noncontradiction and the law of the excluded middle, everything that constitutes the essence of definition itself.

I thus had to come back to this side of these Aristotelian “choices,” stopping short of this object that finds itself imposed on speech. In other words, in this book my work took the form of an attempt to get out of Aristotle’s rut, or, rather (to be less pejorative), to get out of what I prefer to call a *fold* (of his thought). Which I’ve already done, on the Greek side, by showing the back-drop of resistance, of reticence, against which the Aristotelian gesture operates. Since, as pregnant as it may have come to be, the gesture has itself entered into conflict with other positions, even within Greek thought, and it would be stupid to imagine that thought as a unitary route; it’s itself worked on by its other—notably Heraclitus, who opened another possibility. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian gesture prevailed. Because this gesture is the gesture of science. Aristotle—it’s been said before—is the one who formalized scientific discourse.

Let’s come back to this question of the theoretical *imagination*, a question that I find to be essential in philosophy. It’s not only that one thinks; there’s also, prior to what one thinks, the constitution of the *possible* frame of engaged—engageable—questioning, which itself falls under the aegis of the considerable, which is to say what one *thinks to ask*. Beyond that are all these questions that we *don’t imagine* asking ourselves. This is how I sought out the objection that Aristotle, like those who contradicted him, hadn’t imagined, as powerful as their intellectual efforts were. This is why I appealed to a counterpoint, on the Chinese side, which I construct beginning with the Taoist thought of antiquity (the *Laozi* and the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*). From there, I strove to make the two dialogue with each other, these two who were ignorant of each other. For even as I construct their opposition, I believe that there is a common ground of intelligibility to

be developed, where they can meet each other (which is precisely what allows me to oppose them). What I discover in Greece, just like what I discover in China, is in fact on the order of the intelligible. That's my hypothesis, to start. I've said *intelligible* and not "reason," a term that has been too highly marked, perhaps, by the history of European philosophy, and not "truth," which isn't essential in Chinese philosophy. But, on both sides, in China as in Greece, there is *coherence* in thought (cf. the Chinese *li*). Thus, it's possible to bring them into dialogue with each other.

Consequently, I don't suppose an alterity in principle, but I put the *gap* to work. That, it appears to me, gives us a new take on this book, which has been so foundational for what we consider the conditions of possibility of *logos*, the *Gamma* book of Aristotle.

MG: What are the most sensitive points that your analysis touches upon?

FJ: The principles of noncontradiction, of determination by speech, of the excluded middle, definition, and still others, but most of all predication, which seems to me to be the essential part and lies at the heart of my essay.

Because, if there's a principle that Aristotle returns to at all points, it's that speech, to be valid, must *determine*. It must have a departure point or "principle," *arché*, the only thing from which a *logos* can develop. There mustn't be infinite regression of speech, an *eis apeiron*. Where *logos* is concerned, to determine must consequently be taken in its proper sense: I mark an initial "term" from which the *logos* is limited—below which I can't (want to) return. Now, in the *Laozi* one reads of an inverse movement: here everything is ostensibly dissolved that could have been posed in principle, that would have marked the "from which" and the first beginning. Here the question of the origin drowns. The *bottom(s)* of things is abyssal, and the bottom is invisible, in the same way that the bottom of the water is invisible to the person hanging over the edge of the well: "Submerged! As if perhaps [it] exists" (*Laozi*, 4).

Or, against the law of the excluded middle that is itself a conse-

quence of the principal of noncontradiction (which is itself a consequence of speaking-is-saying-something, etc.), the Taoist thinker teaches us to “say” *between* contraries. For Aristotle, and as a function of his ontological presupposition, there is no possible intermediary between contraries, since one single predicate, whatever it is, of one subject alone must necessarily be either affirmed or denied. Now, precisely on the topic of the Tao, and as was noted by one of the greatest Chinese commentators (Wang Bi commenting on Laozi), if one wants to say “there is not [Tao],” it’s found nevertheless to be the case that “it’s from there [Tao] that all existing things proceed”; and if one wants to say to the contrary that “there is [Tao],” it’s found nevertheless to be the case that “no one sees a tangible mark of it.” As the Tao only catches hold *between* these contraries of “there is” and “there is not,” the only characteristic that applies to it is not that of the clear or the distinct (as promoted by the demands of European reason) but the exact inverse, that of the “vague” or the “blurry,” in other words a *calming* return to primitive indistinctiveness.

In this way the *Laozi* proposes “to act without acting,” or “to occupy oneself without occupying oneself,” or “to savor without savoring.” Or again to “speak without speaking,” as the *Zhuangzi* says. The Taoist Sage does not renounce speech, but straightaway liberates her speech from that which may be limiting to it—which attaches it to this “sense” and that would be “one”—and consequently is constraining: I liberate my speech from that which is *saying*, as I liberate my action from that which is *active*.

MG: So here we see how a whole conception of wisdom gets involved, but how does this touch on the essence of speech itself?

FJ: Look at definition itself, which is very much the object of *logos*. The *Laozi* allows us to see that there is noncoincidence and even contradiction between that which is the characteristic mark, or *determinateness*, that takes hold of definition and that which has permitted the advent of this determination and that is not delimitable. For example, it’s well known that if the virtuous man is defined as he who strives to be “virtuous,” to stick to virtue, pro-

ducing every day acts recognized as virtuous, one by one and each one isolated and alone, and consequently capable of being given the label of “virtuous,” somehow true virtue has already been lost. . . . So the *Laozi* can say, without making a paradox out of it, “superior virtue is not virtuous, that’s why it has virtue” (and, symmetrically, “inferior virtue does not depart from virtue, that’s why it is without virtue”). The quality at work, the *Laozi* tells us, is to be considered at a distance, which means as far as possible from its exposable, imposing, and tangible marks. Definition, on the other hand, grasps the capacity of things inasmuch as definition is, not developing or generous (with momentum—going forward), but already in retreat: definition says the spread, not the size, which is to say that it grasps the determination of things while, in spreading out, it is *already* emptied of itself, no longer fecund but sterile.

MG: But isn’t this determining function of *logos* in line with the structuring of Being?

FJ: Indeed. Aristotle’s predicative structure, which is at the foundation of the Aristotelian conception of *logos*, indeed rests on the ontological distinction between “essence” and “accident.” Now, to enter into a Taoist understanding of speech, we have to quit this representation according to which there would be, on the one hand, what “holds itself under”: sub-ject, sub-strate, sub-stance (*hupokeimenon*), an essential *support* of all the determinations that relate to it; and, on the other, what would be added to it circumstantially, making it like this or that, constituting its modalities, its “qualities” or “properties.” That is, this Aristotelian pedestal of the substance and its predicate, the foundation of “logic,” must be questioned. Now one frequently learns this lesson upon entering a classical Chinese text. For after having read the text, often what fails to appear is *what it was about*: the “sub-ject” of the text—that thing to which this “*saying*” would send the reader—itself escapes. Or, to put it in Chinese terms, the “thus” [*ainsi*] (*ran*) no longer reports to a “this” [*ceci*], Aristotle’s *tode ti*. When no entity serves as substrate-support, stands in the place of “this,” the “thuses” thereby evoked are no longer simple

attributes; no strict relationship of predication is established, this connection is loosened. But, of course, translations “logically” reestablish them.

MG: Is reading itself transformed by this?

FJ: I’ll go back to this experience, common to all sinologists, that constitutes the principal difficulty of reading Chinese texts: what is reading when this “something” is not constituted and when speech somehow hangs around it without ever asserting it? When one goes from European to Chinese texts, what one gets stuck on is indeed not so much that there are difficult passages, meaning that words are obscure or constructions complex—but that one doesn’t see exactly what “it’s talking about.” Which is not as much on the order of a lack, but which somehow disappoints our expectations of a meaning, or rather of the construction of a meaning [*sens*]. Indeed, it is so difficult to rid oneself of the ontological prejudice that strictly relates everything that is evoked as a predicate to a *sub-ject*.

MG: What does this opposition lead to from the point of view of “saying” itself?

FJ: I’ve tried to conceptualize it around the question of the passage from “this” to “thus,” which is so central to my eyes. There are effectively two possibilities, one favored by Greece, which is to say the “this” of things, and one favored by China, which is to evoke the “thus” of the process. For the function of the “thus” is no longer to clothe the “this,” as in this old image of metaphysics, still so tenaciously present in the image of Descartes approaching the fire, denuding the ball of wax of its qualities. . . .

This hits on what, ultimately, I’m contrasting: against the “saying something” of the Greeks, the “saying in accordance” of the Taoists. Because withdrawing this “something” is not for all that incoherent (even if it is judged “illogical”), nor does it strip speech of its consistency—the proof of this is what, in our culture, poetry *also* teaches us. “Saying in accordance” [*dire au grê*] is an expression of Mallarmé’s. Not “in accordance *with*,” presupposing a “with something,” but simply “in accordance.” Here is

what helps with understanding Chinese formulas, notably that of Zhuangzi: “One can speak all one’s life without having spoken,” just as much as “not speaking” one can “not have not spoken.” Now I find echoes of this closer to us. For example, in what Rousseau says to us about the “amorous babble,” or in what Lacan teaches us about analytic therapy. There’s no difference in experience here; the reflection of the Chinese, as of the Greeks, illuminates the *common* of experience. Only that every thought proceeds from choices, which for the most part remain implicit or unthought. Thanks to the relation that ties Greece and China together, it seemed possible to me to have a look at this unthought.

MG: But doesn’t this nondetermination of Taoist speech, this tidal flow of sense in the confusion of origins, come at a price?

FJ: It is true: if I define beforehand and first of all if I say to signify; if I ought to say or signify only one thing at a time and if I bind myself to determining this thing; if I can’t accept any contradiction with myself and exclude every middle ground between contraries, et cetera, this is all so as to make myself “clearly” understood to a partner—that is, to say without more confusion or approximation—and to allow myself to progress along with him in the discussion. This is what Socrates teaches us (and Aristotle codifies for us). Without these exigencies, I can certainly speak *to* someone (address myself to him), but not speak *with* someone, meaning produce a *logos* in common, which I can be reassured that we in effect understand equally (*homologia*) and of which *we* share knowledge. “We”: the other with me, or me with me. Since thinking in Greece (but not in China) is “speaking with oneself.”

The justification of this Greek regulation of speech seems thus to me not so onto-logical, in the end, as *dia-logical*. Science’s ambition itself comes afterward; it’s about putting oneself in agreement through speech, by giving a plenary sense to this “through”—this is what the Greeks taught us. Because speech no longer intervenes as a means that we can then abandon, as Zhuangzi proposes, but spreads itself out as a process that, from one side to the next, is that of thought itself—and thus that

thought doesn't know how to go beyond. *Logos* says—founds—this coextension of the two, speech and thought.

MG: Let's move to the second object you've assigned yourself. After *logos*, *eidōs*: "idea," form, and even concept?

FJ: And all of it as support for the "ideal," and this since Plato. Such is the subject of the book I'm writing right now: "The Invention of the Ideal and the Fate of Europe, or Plato read from China" ["L'Invention de l'idéal et le destin de l'Europe, ou Platon lu de Chine"].

I'll pick up here a question that I left in suspense in a prior work, *Vital Nourishment* [*Nourrir sa vie*] (Seuil, 2005). I was interested in this Chinese expression, "to nourish one's life" (*yang sheng*), for the gap that it was able to open. For we commonly say in our culture, with Plato even, to nourish one's body, certainly, but also "to nourish one's soul." "To nourish," such an earthy term, finds itself caught in a situational rupture between concrete and abstract: one nourishes the soul through "truth." Regarding this, I find that there's a significant Chinese expression, found in the *Zhuangzi* but still in use in China: "to nourish one's life." This, it seems to me, is even at the heart of what fascinates today's Occidentals when they interest themselves in *taiji*, *qigong*, or in ginseng, soy, et cetera.

Really, I kept in mind all these ideological and political implications: this attention brought to "nourishing one's life" by ancient Chinese thinkers joined up with an ambient, growing pre-occupation that is, in a certain fashion, *converting* the Europe of today. In a de-Christianizing world that is ceasing to defer its aspirations of happiness into a Beyond, one that is also less and less given over to sacrifice in the name of great causes (Revolution, motherland, etc.), there remains for us nothing more, in effect, once we've made a clean slate of all these projections and their hopes, than to manage and keep "this": this "capital of life," as it is imparted to each individual being and that, stripped of all ideological coatings, would be the only "me" at once indubitable and, as such, "authentic." . . . In brief, I've got something against "personal development," and against everything un-thought that

sells itself under that name today. For wouldn't it be necessary to finally denounce that which pretends to occupy this terrain, a terrain that certainly lies fallow in European thought, but that we see flourishing fallaciously between these two S's: Saintliness and Spirituality?

MG: Wouldn't China, for its part, have produced some "ideal" from its beginnings in the vital?

FJ: "To nourish one's life" doesn't restrictively (materially) signify nourishing one's body, but it doesn't any more signify nourishing one's "soul," projecting a plane of ideality (or immortality) beyond the phenomenal, the functional, and the processes. China hasn't really isolated a plane of *ideality*, divided from *vitality*. Today people emphasize the cost that such a dualism has entailed on the European side; there are lots of things said about it, and lots of rubbish in particular. For don't they *also* see that all philosophy has never ceased to go beyond this dualism, the philosophy of Plato or Descartes included? If not, it wouldn't be philosophy (i.e., its thought wouldn't work). . . . We must also think about the positive—fecund—effects of that which would have thus been our "Cross." Because it's from such a rupture of planes that Europe was able to think the Revolution, *was able* to think utopia, and even, already, that Socrates' process made any sense. For the constitution of a liberating political order, and for its effective structuring into institutions, it was very much necessary that a plane of ideality be disengaged, slicing through the processive, indefinitely "harmonious" functionality thought up by the Chinese.

Indeed, how many Chinese have been condemned, without any sense, or resistance, as a result! Worse yet: I cite, at the end of *Vital Nourishment*, the example of a man of letters (Xi Kang) who asked for nothing but to escape the grasp of power and to live in peace. Now, even this was impossible for him to obtain, since it was so difficult in China to lean on another plane that transcends relations of power: he found himself trapped in a heinous scandal, linked as he was to the ruling family, and was condemned. Now, his final poems, written in prison, have been tradi-

tionally read as acts of repenting—and on the final day, he would again celebrate Harmony on his lute. . . . The force of European thought, on the other hand, is to have produced a world of ideality that, thanks to the claims of Law, Justice, Freedom—which is to say, thanks to the claims of ideals—would permit, or at least ought to permit, an escape from power relations. This is how the position of the “intellectual” built itself up, reposing upon this other world, becoming something that the Chinese Man of Letters never became, at least before the modern age.

MG: Do you see the conception of the ideal at the heart of European thought, and even somewhat at the heart of its history as well?

FJ: This is indeed the question that I must recuperate and work on further. My proposition is to reread Plato, probing into what he tells us about the invention of ideality, which in no way coincides with the history of idealism. Books on Plato’s idealism abound. But I have another object in mind. It is to seize upon what had been the invention of the thought of the ideal, and what had been its conditions of possibility. Because this thought is truly considerable, as much in its *invention* as in its effects and the “fate” that it opens. What audacity, to have opened up another plane than the plane of phenomena and even than the plane of the continual Process of things! Of course, all this *seems self-explanatory* for us today, and can even become tedious, since we’ve learned that it’s “obvious” in philosophy class.

MG: But how, exactly, do the various features of Greek *eidos* constitute themselves in a *plane* of ideality?

FJ: We must indeed consider how coherent these chained-together options are among themselves in Plato’s dialogues. First that of inscribing, if no longer doubt, at least a “surprise” at the beginning of philosophy, because that’s what already introduces a rupture from the world. Now, I haven’t seen a Chinese text valorize doubt and surprise; rather, in China “study” (application-imitation: *xue*) is recommended to those who would engage themselves in thought. In place of breaking with everything one

has “received,” which is what Descartes would heroically call for, it’s more about “treading in the footsteps” (of one’s predecessors), without which one would never know, as Confucius says, how to progress “all the way into the room.” . . .

The ensuing demand is to detach this plane of ideas thanks to the operation of conceptualization. Now, in China the only operative distinction is between “words” and “things” (*ming/shi*), and the invisible doesn’t have the status Plato awarded to it of “intelligible” (*noeton*) ruptured from the sensible, but is instead located at the bottom of the visible in a continuous transition with it. This is what led the Greeks, or at least Plato and Aristotle, to this essential reduction, asserted in or as principle—“wisdom” is “science/knowledge” [*sagesse, savoir*], *sophia* is equivalent to *episteme*—and led them to affirm a self-sufficient value of the “theoretical” as a disinterested knowledge. China, on the other hand, not only doesn’t theorize the concept, but doesn’t pose the Greek question par excellence—“what is it?”—and instead develops a more *processive* knowledge or understanding [*connaissance*], which is to say a knowledge that lights up the evolution yet to come (as in the unfolding of gymnastic sequences or of writing), rather than a properly *objective* knowledge (to which the construction of Greek thought led). Briefly put, China keeps understanding as little as possible *apart from* that which would be experience (although Chinese thought has no concept of experience since it doesn’t extract anything from it); in other words, China wouldn’t dare sacrifice *flavor* [*saveur*] for pure *knowledge* [*savoir*]: the first endlessly deepens sensory experience, the second teaches us to neglect it.

Or, if there is a Chinese mathematics, even then the Chinese thinker doesn’t take mathematics as a model (of truth), and still less does she, like Plato, give mathematics an “ascetic” function, as an object-lesson in how to tear oneself away from the sensible, as we see in the example of the Platonic geometer who, as we know, looks at the diagonal “in itself” and not the one traced in the sand. Certainly the Chinese and the Greeks thought equally about how order comes to the world. But in Greece this order (*cosmos*) comes through modeling/imitating, modeling of

and after the paradigmatic form, beginning with the introduction, through mathematics, of “harmony” through “adaptation” (already the Pythagoreans: Philolaos), while in China harmony is not brought in from an outside but is a product of contraries themselves (Heraclitus would thus be more on the Chinese team) and, as such, is immanent in the world: the harmonizing arrangement is not added to things—as a norm—but follows from an internal regulation coming from the play of polarities alone.

MG: So that’s the “idea-1” [*idéel*], but how does it become the *ideal* [*idéel*]?

FJ: In fact, there is this fecund contradiction through which Plato ceaselessly forces us to pass on our approach to the ideal. The ideal is truly the fruit of a *restriction* (wisdom reduced to knowledge), but also of an *overflowing*, by the flight of thought, the assertion of a delirium or an inspiration. Or further: the ideal demands for its construction a plane of pure representation, definitively disengaged at once from the diversity of the sensible and from the mobility of the affective (the plane of the unifying concept and of the “idea”); but simultaneously, so as to mobilize us, the ideal plunges us down to the fount of the most elementary investment of the passions. It offers itself as a harmoniously ordered whole (*cosmos*), raised to a model or a paradigm, stared at by the “fixed eyes” of the soul (*eidós*), but at the same time reveals itself to be the object of the most violent “love”: *eros* (cf. *The Symposium*). To the point where the ideal succeeds in monopolizing all driving or direction (of us and of our conduct) and is alone enough to draw us toward it. Such is the *mobilization* of the ideal. While the Chinese have more commonly thought of love as an affective reaction, and thus an inclination, Plato’s concept begins with privation: love is the love of *that which* is lacking—and the ideal is the object of this infinite, forever unsatisfied aspiration.

MG: So China would not have known, for its part, this set of “statutes of ideality”?

FJ: The objection has been made to me that every culture has

been attached to the ideal, otherwise there wouldn't be any culture. . . . Now, perhaps we should examine this more closely. The "golden age," for example, is not the ideal, even in Plato. Is there anywhere outside of Greece where we find the equivalent of this choice of the "theoretical"—the true name of the so-called "Greek miracle," of this displacement that makes us go look elsewhere—*theôria* in its true sense—and that the Greeks later elevated into the disinterested quest or "contemplation" (*theôrein*)? In China, in Zhuangzi, as in Plato, we find the theme of "releasing": releasing oneself of everything that obstructs us, to soar upward, away from contingency and constraint. But the difference is that for Plato this *releasing* metamorphoses into conversion, and the spirit is ordered into a *metanoia* that turns us toward *something else*, on the order of "ideas," essences, the ideal "beyond," *ekei*. While in Zhuangzi this "releasing" is a liberation that leads us not to a conversion but to an *availability*, that of the "evolution" in accordance [*au gré*] (*you*), without there being any other plane to turn to. When "ideal" is translated into modern Chinese (*li xiang*), it is rendered as "thought of *li*" or of "coherence," which self-evidently delivers neither an *eros* at work, as on the Greek side, nor the *other plane* elaborated by Plato. Instead it's an internal structure, an organizing coherence that reflects back onto the logic of processes, that takes precedence in the Chinese term, and not the Platonic gesture of breaking and entering, modeling-imitation simultaneous with absolutizing to which the ideal owes its flourishing in Europe (without forgetting its antecedents in Thales or Pythagoras).

MG: From there, how do you get from *logos* and *eidos* to *theos*, the last term of the trilogy? Is the figure of God also a singularity?

FJ: It's the logical continuation. And even then, would I have any choice? The object is altered, the scene changes, but the thought connects the one to the other. I intend to title this third book "Moses or China" ["Moïse ou la Chine"], coming back to Pascal's formula, because it's nifty in its formulation of an alternative: "Which is the most believable of these two: Moses or China?" Even more nifty since, you'll agree, the alternative here is

a bit unsound. On the one side, there's Moses, and it's easy to see what he symbolizes about the European adventure of monotheism and about the European system of relations between the Law and the Person of God (but not His principle, like in philosophy). Sitting opposite, not Confucius, Laozi, or some Chinese Sage, but "China," a space of thought about which Pascal knows pretty much nothing, but in which he well perceives the strength of the objection it represents in respect to European thought. Montaigne had already noticed this. Leibniz or Montesquieu or loads of others, in the century of the Enlightenment, would be attentive to it. Notably, I really like this mark of insight in Montesquieu, when, intrigued as he is by the weighty menace China represents to his political typology, he remarks that there's something really "sad": that China "will not convert." At the beginning of the eighteenth century, to understand that Christianity would be unable to penetrate into China, and this for cultural reasons, while "Catholicism" thought of itself as a universal truth, attests to the depth of his intelligence. . . .

In ancient China, as elsewhere, people sacrificed to natural elements, springs, winds, cardinal directions, in a quite analogous manner, consequently, to what was found in other corners of the world, and notably in the Mediterranean, in the same era. Furthermore, above these scattered divinities, there was the configuration of a "Lord on high" (*Shangdi*), to whom people prayed and sacrificed, who commanded the human world, whom people feared—in short, who took on a number of God's functions. But here's the thing: really early on, meaning already at the turning from the second to the first millennium BCE, with the establishment of a new dynasty of the Zhou, a parallel notion emerges, that of "Heaven." It begins to line up with the notion of the Lord on high and border on it. But progressively it comes to marginalize and supplant that notion, as is established in archaic Chinese literature, beginning in the eighth century BCE, in parallel with the drying-up of prayer. For it's the ritualistic option that prevailed in China, and until the end of the Empire sacrifice to Heaven by the Emperor (the "Son of Heaven") is the principal (both religious and political) office. Now, "Heaven" is something

entirely different from God. The notion comes to mean the alternation of day and night, the succession of seasons, something that progressively comes to be thought as the logic of regulation. Its transcendence, in sum, is that of a totalization of immanence. So, since the end of Chinese antiquity, “Heaven” often serves to mean nature (in Xunzi, in Zhuangzi).

At bottom, this is the essential part: China never *worked with* God, no more than China ever eliminated God: it’s never had a critique or “death” of God. So there’s never been either religious fixation or dramatization. China never conceived of proofs of the existence of God, like our philosophy has been doing until the modern era, but neither has China developed atheism. Incidentally, in our culture this is what seduces the thinkers of Enlightenment. They believed they could detect tolerance in China, which was of course an error, but it’s also true that China has never known this kind of exclusiveness—dogma—that is attached to the thought of God. If there are proceedings against Buddhism, notably in the ninth century, these were for political reasons, not for reasons of faith. Our “treatises” of theology or of *a-* or *anti-*theology find themselves scrutinized from outside; finally, through this Chinese exteriority, we get out of this perpetual reversal of arguments.

MG: All that remains is the question of what connects these three terms.

FJ: That’s what led me to speak about the three notions as forming a triangle, one that thusly organizes this work in a trilogy recapitulating an adventure of occidental thought, handily reflected in the mirror of China. Between the promotion of *logos*, the invention of *eidōs*, and that which allowed for the erection of the figure of God, there’s an incontestable family tie (an “atavism,” as Nietzsche would say). I’m becoming more and more interested in these forms of cultural coherence, I would even say these *complicities*, which bring together these things that, on the inside of our tradition—since there really is a “tradition,” in this respect—we separate, or at least we are content to juxtapose.

MG: But, if there's an alterity of Chinese thought in relation to European thought, at the same time there's something like a shared root, which allows for dialogue between them. . . .

FJ: I'm wary of this imagery of roots, which seems awfully metaphysical to me. If there's a first lesson to draw out of this voyage in China, it's rather that we can no longer rest on this soft pillow of notions that are immediately [*d'emblée*] universal, or at least notions whose universality we're assured of. I say "immediately." Because I don't renounce the drive to universality, but I think that it has to be the fruit of a labor and a process (that's why I've spoken, here and there, of universalizing factors [*universalisants*]), and that, even more than alterity, it is to be constructed; it's on the horizon, and not at the point of departure.

MG: So where, then, is the common ground between the Chinese and us located?

FJ: Indeed, both the possibility of a gap and the possibility of a shared commonality must be maintained. Because, of course, there's "community" or "communality" between the ancient Chinese and us, which is not only a community of "experience" but equally of the *thinkable*. For what is found on both sides, in Chinese as in Greek texts, is, as I've said, always *intelligible*, and the basic property of "intelligence" is precisely the power of circulation between diverse intelligibilities, like in the passage from one language to another—it's even that which creates this capacity. So, to step into the texts of ancient China, I didn't need to undergo any conversion (and I say this against a certain guru-populated image of the "Orient"), nor did I even need to "sinicize" myself; all I needed was patience and what I call "craft" [*métier*] (that of the sinologist: learning to *read*). Or, if I've privileged the notion of the "fold" while considering that Chinese thought could have formed other foldings than Greek thought, it's because this metaphor has the merit of allowing both to be heard, of figuring the gap in question configurationally, coherently, allowing it to form branches, and this not anecdotally, at the same time as the continuity of a unique intellectual "fabric" is supposed. This is also why I have denounced all the categories that would grasp

the gap between thoughts in terms that would be, to a greater or lesser extent, naturalizing, like “he’s Chinese,” “there’s something Chinese here,” or (Chinese) “spirit,” “soul,” “mentality,” et cetera.

MG: What consequences for the work of the sinologist does this result in?

FJ: Let’s move on from these two linked conditions: firstly, the given *heterotopia* of traditions of thought, and secondly, both the *dialogical* demand and capacity of the mind, which is fit to link them. Anyone can figure out what kind of work results from all this for sinology. Far from being able to limit itself to setting up a knowledge that is so vast, it’s true, that it’s discouraging, sinology will firstly be a trial of *upsetting* [*ranger/déranger*]: as such it is always, by itself and about some object it examines, a *philosophical exercise*. It is a never-exhausted, never-satisfied call to think more radically. But, of course, this demand for radicalism of labor—in labor—mustn’t be confused with what would be a radicalism of alterity, comfortably proposed as a principle, like some people attribute to me without having read my work. What task falls to the sinologist, you ask? Above all to challenge himself to move past the temptation to immediately house Chinese representation in a (European) category that he would already have at his disposal. We would then see him led to *de-* and *re-categorize* his thought so as to open it onto the knowledge of this elsewhere. A progressive knowledge, *de-presupposing* little by little, *re-configuring* correspondingly, until it rejoins the “obviousness” in which this other thought has evolved, similarly without having suspected the particular choices that produced it.

MG: But wouldn’t there sometimes be the risk of forcing a separation between the two thoughts concerned?

FJ: In spite of the nitpicking that so often goes on around my work, nevertheless I get the sense of a persistent uneasiness, indeed, here and there, like a rumbling: haven’t I exaggeratedly overemphasized the divergences—underestimated the convergences—between European and Chinese thought? Now it seems to

me that, here again, the question is poorly phrased and that two things are surreptitiously being confused: on the one hand, opposing “worlds” (in postulating them as closed totalities), which is not only the act of lazy thinking but which is eminently dangerous; and, on the other hand, studying *just where* a theoretical *overflowing* (of our categories) may lead, and thus making way for a displacement of the mind. With the simultaneous risk and profit that engaged investigation, *historia* in the Greek sense, causes something unexpected (something that divests reason momentarily of its resources) to appear (contrary to the *pre-suppositions* of our thought), something not conceived of nor even imagined—since the imaginary of representations precedes, as I’ve said, our conceptual elaborations.

An example: if I hadn’t gone to China, would I ever have imagined to step outside of the question of “what is it?” that had seemed, up until then, so natural to my eyes? Reifying or essentializing Difference is a definitively sterile procedure, but isn’t there a completely different one, a stimulating one, the procedure of *putting the gap to work*? Which is the task I assign myself in my essays, so that everything, up to and including language itself, comes to recast itself, so that our thought begins to “unfold” itself, so that the lodes that our reason had abandoned for so long are found once again (such as those which were so happily mined again by Western art in the twentieth century), so that paths finally reopen that reason had believed were closed or superseded once and for all, paths that were forgotten because they didn’t lead anywhere anymore, and paths that suddenly, in this Chinese elsewhere, allow us to discover other possible fertilities.

And, for that matter, is all this merely about sinology? Wouldn’t this be the vocation of philosophy itself? For what is philosophizing, of the most general sort, if not precisely *opening a gap* in thought? A philosopher effectively becomes a philosopher only as much as she separates herself from her predecessors. We read Aristotle to follow how he strays from Plato and causes other possible routes of investigation to appear (or Hegel only becomes Hegel in straying from Kant—and in not understanding Kant, otherwise he would have remained a Kantian).

MG: Your work, as you have never ceased to remind us, is the work of a reader, which takes place through meticulous attention to words and to textual organization. In fact, you're as much of a philologist as a philosopher . . .

FJ: Indeed, my methods are inseparably philosophical and philological. Philological, because I think that we never *read* closely enough and that one has to get down to the letters of the text, and even more so, for that matter, when one is a European sinologist. That's why I start by forcing myself to read a text the way the Chinese read it—I make a principled demand out of this: not only to read classical texts, but their commentaries, yet without remaining subservient to them. I can move away from them in whatever follows, but I begin with them.

Without some philological imperative, my work wouldn't make any sense. I don't broadcast it, but it's easy to verify: I always respect historical order, and my citations are always taken from a coherent corpus. As a result, there's no "glossing over." An example: if I talk about the "bland" (in *In Praise of Blandness* [*Éloge de la fadeur*]), I find my references first in rituals, then in the thinkers of antiquity, then in a treatise on characterology from the third century (Liu Shao), then in discussions of painting and music, and finally in reflections on poetry. But, all through these successive references, I try to construct my object, making this notion into a *concept* that is aware of Chinese thought and its aesthetics; and when I say "Chinese thought," I'm not referring to any totality of principle—must we be reminded of this?—but simply to that which is written in Chinese, just as Greek thought is that which is written in Greek.

MG: Are you alone on this path?

FJ: I understand that there are other ways to practice sinology. So there are certain trends that have come up: look at all these recent books that have been published on "Zhuangzi." For my part, I respect such trends, as much as any monographic inquiry, and if a work is done well, I'll use it. But I think something else could be done, which would be the forging of theoretical objects that doesn't stop at mere erudition but continues to develop questions

beyond that. My essays are built around these questions, and their intrigue, their plot, follows from that (since I don't know any book of thought without an "intrigue" . . .). Next to the orientalist manner of practicing sinology, there is thus another way, which I'd call philosophical and which I think is being developed.

MG: It's impossible not to talk politics when we're dealing with the China of today. We're witnesses to an extraordinary phenomenon: on the one hand, there is the opening of China's economy on the basis of its dazzling industrial development; on the other, there is the ongoing hold of the Chinese Communist Party, with the promises of democratization that were heard by some at the beginning of this process no longer seeming to be on the agenda. China has this political opacity that we want to hear the sinologist explain. Even more since, in your case, there has to be some relation between the series of philosophical choices you've evoked and the Chinese political tradition—a subject that you're sure to study one day. What's happening now?

FJ: That's a question that I've already broached several times, but only obliquely, without ever having treated it in toto. In *Detour and Access* [*Le Détour et l'accès*], for example, I wrote a chapter on "dissidence," in which I tried to analyze the ways in which the art of the indirect, developed by China, had again put the brakes on freedom of expression, something that certain Chinese authors had denounced themselves (I'm thinking about Wang Fuzhi). I also come up against the question of theoretical perspectives that would allow us to shed light on the China of today, notably by proposing certain concepts, like "situational potential" or "silent transformation," or for that matter the concept of "regulation."

MG: What do you mean by *situational potential*?

FJ: I take this notion from the Chinese strategists of antiquity (Sun Zi; Sun Bin; cf. my *Treatise on Efficacy* [*Traité de l'efficacité*]). Because how has efficacy been conceived of in Chinese thought? Not by modeling and constructing an ideal form and posing this form as a goal, which would then imply

making the ideal form enter into reality, something that couldn't happen without forcing the matter somewhat. He who wants to be efficacious (in China) strives rather to spot—to detect—the factors within the situation at hand that are already favorable to him, so as to tip the situation progressively in his favor. I don't directly target an effect by seeking to impose my plan on things, which anyway couldn't be done without expense and resistance, but I continually make the situation evolve according to these significant factors that I detect, so that the effect flows from the situation itself. It's the situation, in other words, that gives birth to the anticipated result. Or, if nothing was favorable to me today, I would prefer to wait, rather than to face an adverse situation and to break myself on it—which would be beautiful, assuredly, and even heroic, but to little effect. . . .

For the Chinese strategist knows that the situation is itself in evolution and that a new hand will be dealt, little by little, on which she will once more be able to draw in order to succeed. From this results a conception of efficacy at once indirect (in relation to what would be a targeted goal) and discrete (as it flows from the course of things rather than seeks to submit that course to its project). That's why in the end I preferred to change my term and, on the subject of China, speak of *efficiency* rather than efficacy: efficiency allows the continuity of an unrolling to be heard, as well as the art of picking up on the immanence therein, without privileging a subject-ego (that projects, that acts).

MG: What do you mean by *silent transformation*?

FJ: That's a connected notion. The hero (on the European side) doesn't only set goals for himself; it is just as imperative for him to act to cause the ideal form he's traced to come into being. Now it is known that one of the most influential themes in Chinese thought, mixed up in all its different schools but particularly insistent in Taoism, is "non-action" (*wu wei*), which mustn't be understood in the sense of disengagement, even less as renouncing or passivity. Even if the Sage and the strategist don't *act*, they "transform" (*hua*), that is, they cause, through their influence, the situation to evolve in the desired direction. The Sage for the world's

benefit, the strategist for a personal benefit—the difference between them being not one of logic but of scale and interest.

Now, transformation manifests itself precisely as action's contrary. Action, since it is local and momentary, coming back to a subject (I act "here and now"), makes a demarcation between itself and the course of things, and thus re-marks itself and can become the object of a story (the epic). Transformation, on the other hand, is too global, too progressive, founded on and in the course of things, to allow itself to be located in its process. So it is "silent." But, after the fact, its results are plain.

MG: An example?

FJ: You could look at these "silent transformations" that we're all living through, like global warming or aging. I say "silent" because we don't perceive them. The Chinese tell us that action is all the more visible in that it forces a situation, but that action remains an epiphenomenon in regard to its effects. Transformation, on the other hand, is effective, and even more effective at that, because we don't see it at work and because it doesn't create events. This is how Chinese thought dissolves individuality and event in the globality of processes. Against the great European myth of an Event (and an advent) that introduces a rupture in time and whose anticipation has never yet ripped itself free of the religious character that clings to it (the great "Before"), the Chinese make us attentive to long times, slow duration, seeing only in the "event" the momentary surfacing—like a trail of sea foam—of a much weightier mutation that we wouldn't know how to break up into component moments.

MG: How are these ideas able to throw light on the China of the present?

FJ: It seems to me that China, even today, isn't projecting some plan on the future, pursuing some given or targeted end, even an imperialist one, but is exploiting, day after day, its situational potential as well as possible. Which is to say China is making good use of favorable factors, regardless of the domain in which they may be found—economic, political, international—and whatever

the occasion may be, so as to reinforce its power and its ranking among the nations. It's only now that we're beginning, a little dumbfoundedly, to see the *results* of this process: that, in a few decades, China has become the great factory of the world, and that, in the coming years, its potential will still continue, ineluctably, to increase. And all this without some great, rupturing event. Deng Xiaoping, the "Little Helmsman," has been this great silent transformer of China. By alternating liberalization and repression, he made Chinese society gradually pass from a socialist regime to a hypercapitalism, without ever having to declare an open fissure between the two. Or take as an example Chinese immigration to France: it expands from one neighborhood to another, each newcomer quickly brings his kin one by one, Chinese cultural events gain importance from year to year, et cetera. But the transition is so continuous that nobody notices it, and thus there is nothing to grab onto to dam the flow. In sum, this transformation is so progressive and so silent, and fundamentally so much in the "course of things," that we *don't see it*. But here we are, suddenly realizing one day that, on our street, so many of the stores are Chinese. . . .

MG: You say that Chinese thought dissolves the event. But there's still Tiananmen . . .

FJ: Dare I say it? These events, as seen from within China, might not have had all the importance that we attribute to them from without. I myself protested against repression (in the name of the *Association Française d'Études Chinoises* over which I then presided), and *we* had reason to protest. But we mustn't delude ourselves about the results of these events in China—which doesn't throw into question either the heroism of those who did resist or the horror of the massacre. Nevertheless, we should realize that it's the progressive flow of transformation that prevailed, as much as the law of the market.

MG: Thus there's a Chinese originality in this respect?

FJ: Take a look at History. In China, there has never been what took place in the USSR as it became Russia: no Twentieth Congress, no de-Stalinization, no perestroika, et cetera, which

goes to show that there was no rupture; it was even the same party that was able to remain in power. May I remind you that de-Maoization took place *in the name of Mao*, but by making use of other citations that incited a bit more realism. I remember my shock, felt as a student of sinology, when one fine day I noticed that the quotation from Mao, in the box at the top of the newspaper page, which was habitually in boldface, was no longer in boldface, although quotations from him were still in abundance on the rest of the page. Then these citations of Mao began to change; others were preferred; then they grew more and more infrequent. And so on, and so on . . . This way of steering change has a double effect: on the one hand, it avoids any rupture that would throw into question the legitimacy of those in power; on the other hand, it obliges you to enter into complicity with it, as it necessitates a sideways reading, and thus makes you a party to engaged transformation. Indeed, every time the gap is too thin, or too *nuanced*, for anybody to rebel against it.

I was in China when Deng Xiaoping got back into politics. How was he rehabilitated? After the death of Mao in September 1976, everybody continued on the theme of “criticizing Deng.” The adjacent formulas, which supported this arrowhead-formula, were quite simply caused to vanish progressively. Then one day the expression “mistakes of Deng Xiaoping” appeared. Everyone understood that he had been rehabilitated, or more precisely that he was already in power. At the same time, nobody could protest: a “mistake,” well, that’s not good. . . . Finally, the expression “comrade Deng Xiaoping” returned. You can see that this manner of distilling rumors, smoothing over the creases while paying special consideration to the continuities, absorbs you into the movement that’s already at work without offering the fault lines that would permit you to react.

These kinds of theoretical tools are necessary to understand the unique case that contemporary China represents: that of a hyper-capitalist regime under a communist cover, in any case that of a hierarchical, bureaucratized structure . . .

MG: But is it the same Communist Party?

FJ: It is very much *transformed*. China knew how to renew its

elites, from one generation to the next, thanks also to voyages abroad. Right now there's a generation of managers at the head of the party. But the party has remained the structure of power; it continues to command power and calls back into line those who would otherwise balk at its control. A lot of people bear a grudge against me for having said it, but I'll repeat: one of the things that really stuns me, when I turn toward Chinese thought, is that China has never conceived of another regime besides monarchy. It might be regrettable, but that's just how it is! In China people only spoke of the good or bad prince, of "order" or "disorder"—and even then, people often thought that a bad prince was better than anarchy. . . . There certainly have been moments where Chinese power has come undone. But I've never seen any trace of the appearance of an ideal of the political, in the sense of the forms-to-be-imitated (the *eidé*) with which Plato, Aristotle, and (in our culture) Montesquieu have grappled: the forms that constitute so many distinct regimes whose qualities can be compared.

MG: And as for "regulation," the final point in your triangle?

FJ: The difference between the recent histories of China and Russia jumps out at me. This difference has to be explained. I believe that it can't be analyzed without *also* being aware of the categories developed by Chinese thought. "Regulation" is a master-idea in ancient China; the course of "heaven" continues to be renewed because it never ceases to be regulated. To regulate is to maintain equilibrium over a series of changes (the notion of *zhong*). Now, do the leaders of China imitate model forms? I think they're more precisely engaged in *regulating*, so as to attempt to contain all the risks of overheating and of the increasing gaps that threaten to give rise to insurrections. You see the discourse of today's Chinese politicians: let's pay more attention to the peasantry, let's reduce the more striking differences between the provinces, let's limit corruption, et cetera. In short, let's guard against "deregulations." All of this to avoid an explosion (and then the fall of the regime). The transformation begun by Deng Xiaoping, including its most brutal blows, is of a pair with the concern over regulating the transition to modernization; even as

the citizenry is called to the rescue of a faltering communism, an exuberant nationalism flourishes—but without the second overtly renouncing the first. To me, it doesn't seem we can completely solve the Chinese situation with the categories of political analysis that are the most habitual to us.

MG: At the same time, this is a period of massive borrowings from the West.

FJ: China has already borrowed Revolution, as a political model. And China has borrowed scientific modeling. Today, China knows how to administer things as well as we do. But China also keeps a hold on its other stock of resources. It plays with both of them; that's an advantage. As Mao said: "walk on both legs." There is a Western leg, which has stepped into the lead and makes us say, "they're all just like us." But China hasn't renounced the other, more strategic leg. Let's take an example: how does a Chinese leader come to France? In general, not through Paris. When Li Peng, the Butcher of Tiananmen, came to France, we were waiting for him; we had sworn to teach him a lesson. . . . Now, he came via Toulouse (like others after him). Beginning by fascinating us with the prospect of his buying a couple of planes, he knew how to discreetly increase "his situational potential" and reduce us to silence. There's no "culturalism" on my part when I remark on this. But perhaps there would be some interest in *also* keeping in mind the coherences elaborated by Chinese thought, that can be conceptualized, and that furnish other elements to be *read*—even current events.