
The Goujian Story in Antiquity

BEFORE LOOKING AT THE VARIETY of ways in which the figure of Goujian assumed meaning for Chinese in the twentieth century, we need to examine the story itself. In reconstructing the Goujian story, I have not been unduly concerned with the historicity of particular incidents or details.¹ The impact of the story in the twentieth century, as noted in the preface, derived not from its accuracy as history but from its power as narrative.² Nor have I attempted to trace the evolution of the story as it wended its way from ancient times on up to the end of the imperial era. This is not an exercise in Chinese literary history. What I want to do in this opening chapter is establish a rough baseline for what was known about the Goujian narrative in the first century C.E., the time when the first full-fledged version of the story (of which we are aware) appeared. To this end, I have consulted, either in the original or in translation, such basic ancient sources as *Zuozhuan* (Zuo's Tradition), *Guoyu* (Legends of the States), Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Records of the Historian), and *Lüshi chunqiu* (The Annals of Lü Buwei).³ However, I have relied most heavily on the later (and highly fictionalized) *Wu Yue chunqiu* (The Annals of Wu and Yue), originally compiled by the Eastern Han author Zhao Ye from 58 to 75 C.E.⁴ I have done this for two reasons. First, in comparison with the earlier sources, it is (as David Johnson correctly observes) "far more detailed and coherent" and contains "major new thematic elements."⁵ Second, it had a seminal influence

on accounts of the Goujian story written during the remainder of the imperial period and was a principal source, directly or indirectly, for many of the versions of the narrative that circulated in the twentieth century.⁶

THE GOUJIAN STORY AS KNOWN IN ANCIENT TIMES

The setting for the Goujian story was the rivalry beginning in the latter phase of the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 B.C.E.) between the neighboring states of Wu (in modern Jiangsu) and Yue (in modern Zhejiang), two newly ascendant powers on the southeastern periphery of the contemporary Chinese world. In 496 B.C.E. the king of Wu, Helu (alt. Helü), took advantage of the opportunity created by Yue's preoccupation with funerary observances for its recently deceased king to mount an attack. The new Yue ruler, Goujian, at the time only in his early twenties, counterattacked and employed exceptionally brutal tactics to defeat the forces of Wu. Helu was mortally wounded in the fighting, but before dying he summoned his son and successor Fuchai (alt. Fucha) and asked him to never forget that Goujian had killed his father. Accordingly, after assuming the kingship, Fuchai devoted himself energetically to planning his vengeance against Yue. Goujian saw what was happening and, overconfident after his earlier triumph, asked his trusted minister Fan Li what he thought about a preemptive strike against Wu.⁷ Fan Li, observing that Yue was not nearly as strong as Wu, urged the young king to be patient. However, convinced that he knew best, Goujian went ahead and attacked Wu anyway. The year was 494 B.C.E. It did not take long for Fuchai's armies to inflict a severe defeat on Yue at Fujiao (in the northern part of Shaoxing county in modern Zhejiang), forcing Goujian and a remnant army of five thousand men to retreat to Mount Kuaiji (southeast of modern Shaoxing city), where they were surrounded by the forces of Wu.

This was a critical point in the sequence of events. Goujian, facing certain defeat, was fully prepared, we are told, to fight to the finish, but his high officials remonstrated with him, arguing the case for a less suicidal course. In the interest of saving Yue from extinction, they contended, Goujian should do everything possible to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict, mollifying Fuchai with humble words and lavish gifts and even evincing his willingness to go with his wife to Wu as slaves of the Wu king. Swallowing his pride, Goujian, with much misgiving, acquiesced in this strategy. It was also decided that Fuchai's grand steward (*taizai*), Bo Pi (alt. Bo Xi), well known for his greed and lust, should be secretly bribed with

beautiful women and precious gifts in order to gain internal support for Yue at the Wu court.⁸

Goujian's servitude in Wu, together with his wife, began in the fifth year of his reign (492 B.C.E.). Fan Li accompanied them while the other top official of Yue, Wen Zhong, remained at home to look after the state's governance during the king's absence. During the ceremonial leave-taking that took place prior to Goujian's crossing of the Zhe River (the modern Qiantang River) into Wu, his official counselors, in an effort to console and encourage him, pointed to the historical precedents of King Tang of the Shang dynasty, King Wen of the Zhou, and other sage rulers of antiquity, all of whom had experienced great setbacks and painful humiliations in their day, but had ultimately managed to turn defeat into accomplishment and calamity into good fortune so that their merit was passed down through the ages. Goujian was encouraged not to berate himself and view his predicament as the result of personal failings; rather, he should endure humiliation for the sake of Yue's survival.⁹

Upon reaching the Wu capital and being brought into the presence of Fuchai, Goujian immediately knelt to the ground and performed a *ketou** before the Wu ruler. He then acknowledged the shame he felt over his actions in the fighting against Wu and expressed his profound gratitude to Fuchai for sparing his life and permitting him, as a lowly slave, to sweep the dirt from the palace. He also asked Fuchai's forgiveness for his part in the death of the Wu king's father.

Fuchai's prime minister, Wu Zixu,¹⁰ unable to contain his fury over the scene unfolding before him, admonished Fuchai, stating his disbelief that, in light of Goujian's wanton behavior at Mount Kuaiji, the king did not have him killed forthwith. Fuchai responded that he had heard that if one put to death someone who had surrendered, misfortune would be visited on one's family for three generations. His reason for not killing Goujian was not that he felt any affection for him but, rather, that it would be an offense against Heaven. The grand steward, Bo Pi, now stepped forward and, after criticizing Wu Zixu for his small mindedness and lack of comprehension of the larger principles for ensuring a state's safety, spoke in support of the Wu king's position. In the end, Fuchai did not have Goujian killed; instead, he issued orders that the king of Yue was to serve as a car-

*Also *koutou*, a ubiquitous Chinese ritual denoting respect for a superior and involving knocking the head on the ground while in a kneeling position; the origin of the English word *kowtow*.

riage driver and tend to the horses. Goujian, his wife, and Fan Li were domiciled in a humble stone cottage in the vicinity of the palace.¹¹

In their daily lives, Goujian and his wife wore the coarse clothing of working people. The husband collected forage and took care of the horses, the wife brought water for the animals to drink, cleared away the manure, and washed out and swept the stables. They went on in this fashion for three years, showing not the slightest sign of anger or resentment. When Fuchai climbed a tower in the distance to spy on them, he saw Goujian, his wife, and Fan Li seated by a mound of horse manure. He was greatly impressed that, even in these straitened circumstances, the proper protocol was observed between ruler and minister and the proper etiquette carried out between husband and wife. He turned to Bo Pi and remarked that Goujian was a man of integrity and Fan Li a dedicated and upright minister, and that he felt sad on their behalf. Bo Pi expressed the hope that the king of Wu would display a sage's heart and feel compassion for these poor, miserable souls. Fuchai then announced that he had made up his mind to pardon Goujian. Three months later he chose an auspicious day on which to issue the pardon and asked Bo Pi what he thought of the idea. The granting of grace was always rewarded, Bo Pi responded, and if Fuchai dealt generously with Goujian now, Goujian would be sure to repay his kindness in the future.¹²

When Goujian learned of Fuchai's plans, he was delighted. But he was also worried that something would go awry, and so he asked Fan Li to look into the matter by means of divination. Fan Li, after so doing, reported that he saw harm arising out of the situation and did not predict a happy outcome. As if on cue, Wu Zixu now approached the king of Wu and, arguing as he had before, urged him to have Goujian killed, lest Fuchai repeat the calamities suffered by the Xia and Shang dynasties. After taking into consideration the opposing advice of his high officials, Fuchai finally announced that when he had recovered from the illness that had long been plaguing him, he would pardon the king of Yue in accordance with the recommendation of his grand steward.¹³

One month later, Goujian summoned Fan Li and observed that in three months' time Fuchai had not gotten better. He asked Fan Li to use his divination arts to foretell the likely outcome of the Wu king's illness. Fan Li reported back that Fuchai was not going to die and that on a specified date (*jisi*) his illness would abate. He urged the king of Yue to take careful note of this. Goujian, announcing that his survival during captivity was entirely owing to Fan Li's stratagems and recognizing that the time had come

for him to act decisively, asked Fan Li to suggest a plan. Fan Li outlined a strategy that he said was certain to succeed. Goujian should request permission to inquire after the condition of Fuchai's illness. If permitted to see the king, he should then ask leave to taste Fuchai's stool and examine his facial color. After so doing, he should kneel to the ground and offer his congratulations to the king of Wu, informing him that he would soon get well and would not die. When this prognosis proved correct, Goujian need have no further worries.

The following day Goujian asked Bo Pi to arrange an audience with Fuchai so that he could ask about his health. Fuchai summoned Goujian into his presence. As it happened, at the very moment Goujian arrived at the palace, the Wu king had just moved his bowels and Bo Pi was carrying the stool out when he encountered Goujian at the entranceway. Goujian greeted Bo Pi and asked if he might taste Fuchai's stool in order to make a prognosis concerning his illness. He then proceeded to stick his finger into the container and taste the stool, after which he went inside and announced to the Wu king: "The captive servant Goujian offers his congratulations to the great king. The king's illness will begin to improve on *jisi*. On *renshen* of the third month he will be completely well." Fuchai naturally wanted to know how Goujian knew all this. Goujian explained that he had formerly studied with an expert who made prognoses on the basis of the smell and taste of fecal matter and had learned about the correspondence between the taste of stool and the taste of cereal grain. When the taste of a person's stool was not in harmony with the seasonal taste of grain, the person was certain to die, but when the two were in harmony the person would live. He informed Fuchai that he had just tasted the king's stool and that the taste was bitter and sour. Since this taste was in keeping with the taste of grain in spring and summer, he knew that the king would make a full recovery.¹⁴ On hearing this, Fuchai was overjoyed and announced to Goujian: "Truly you are a man of virtue." He pardoned him on the spot and told him he could leave the stone cottage and move into the palace, but he was still to tend to the horses and carry on with his other duties as before.¹⁵

Fuchai's illness began to improve exactly as Goujian said it would. Stirred by Goujian's loyalty and honesty, the Wu king ordered a banquet to be held with Goujian seated in the place of honor. On the following day Wu Zixu, appalled at Fuchai's conduct, went to the palace to admonish him. He warned the king about people who were outwardly friendly but harbored harmful designs in their hearts. He then went into a lengthy account of the real motives behind Goujian's behavior. Goujian "has started out by drinking the

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Figure 1. Goujian Tastes Fuchai's Stool. Source: *Wu jiejie jiang lishi gushi* (Taipei, 1979).

great king's urine, but he will end up eating the great king's heart; he has started out by tasting the great king's stool, but he will end up devouring the great king's liver." The very existence of the state of Wu hung in the balance, Wu Zixu remonstrated. Fuchai must open his eyes to what was taking place. Having heard enough, Fuchai advised his prime minister to forget the entire matter and not to mention it again. He then went ahead with his plan to pardon Goujian, escorting him personally through the Serpent Gate on the south side of the capital and asking him, on his return to Yue, to always bear in mind his good will in forgiving him. Goujian performed a *ketou* and vowed before Heaven that he and his high officials would forever remain loyal to the Wu king and never turn against him. He performed another *ketou*. Fuchai raised him up and helped him into his carriage. With Fan Li holding the whip, they drove off.

As they arrived at the ferry crossing, Goujian raised his face toward Heaven, sighed, and remarked that he had not expected to live to cross the Zhe River again. During the crossing, he and his wife, overcome with emotion, covered their faces and wept, as the people of Yue greeted them joyously and the high officials of the state stepped forward to welcome them and offer their congratulations.¹⁶

Goujian's return to Yue took place in the winter of the seventh year of his reign (490 B.C.E.). The king of Wu had restored to Yue a piece of land one hundred *li** in circumference, with the boundaries carefully specified. Goujian remarked to Fan Li that for three years, as a prisoner of Wu, he had submitted to constant humiliation and that it was only because of his prime minister's wise counsel that he had been able to survive and eventually return to his native land. Now it was his wish to restore stability and calm to Yue and build a new capital on Mount Kuaiji. He asked Fan Li to take full charge of the undertaking. Fan Li ingeniously incorporated into the new capital's design a number of features that appeared to signify Goujian's continued loyalty to Fuchai. For example, in the construction of the outer wall, he left a portion of the northwestern side (the side facing the state of Wu) open in order to signal to Wu that Yue remained subordinate to it and had not built the wall for defensive purposes. But in keeping with Goujian's ultimate goal of vanquishing Wu and becoming overlord (*ba*), †

*A unit of length equal to about 1/3 of a mile.

†The *ba*, sometimes translated as "hegemon," was the top holder of real power in the declining Zhou dynasty.



Figure 2. Graphic Depiction of “Sleeping on Brushwood and Tasting Gall.” Although hundreds of variations on this image have been created, the bed of brushwood and suspended gallbladder are constants. Generally, such images contain only Goujian, but occasionally, as in this figure, other elements are added, in this instance the image of Goujian’s wife at her spinning wheel. Source: Chen Heqin and Zhu Zefu, *Woxin changdan*.

Fan Li also secretly incorporated certain features reflective of this goal into the capital’s design.¹⁷

After resuming his rule over Yue, Goujian, a different man from the headstrong, self-indulgent youth of only a few years before, governed in a respectful and circumspect manner, practicing strict economy and avoiding extravagance. Knowing that taking revenge against Wu was something that required elaborate preparation and could not be accomplished overnight, he worked incessantly, never resting his mind or body. When overcome with sleepiness he would use the sharp smell of knotweed (*Polygonum*) to keep his eyes from closing. When the soles of his feet were cold, he would soak them in even colder water to lift his spirits. In the winter, when it was freezing, he would often carry ice and snow in his arms, while in the heat of summer he would hold a hot brazier in his hands. Although the proverb *woxin changdan* (“to sleep on brushwood and taste gall”) that became so

closely associated with the Goujian story in the late imperial era does not appear to have come into use until the Song dynasty, already in ancient times we are told that Goujian hung a gallbladder in his room, licking it every time he went in or out in order to guard against complacency and to remind himself of the bitter suffering he had undergone.¹⁸

Since Goujian knew that Fuchai liked to wear comfortable, loose-fitting garments, he conceived the idea of dispatching people into the hills to gather kudzu vines (*ge*) and then having women use the fibers to weave cloth to present to the Wu ruler as a means of currying his favor. His ministers all thought this was a good idea, and orders were given to carry it out. But before the project was consummated, it had already come to Fuchai's attention that Goujian, since returning to Yue, had shown himself completely content with his circumstances. He was so impressed with Goujian's behavior that he decided to confer more land on him, augmenting Yue's territory to eight hundred *li* in circumference. To repay the king of Wu for this kindness, Goujian sent him one hundred thousand bolts of hemp cloth (*gebu*), nine wooden containers of honey, seven multicolored square-shaped vessels, five pairs of fox pelts, and ten boats constructed of bamboo. Fuchai, who had always regarded the remote and insignificant state of Yue as possessing little if anything of value, was struck by this tangible expression of Goujian's loyalty and consideration.

Wu Zixu, after learning of these developments, went home, lay down on his bed, and expressed to his attendants his forebodings concerning the future consequences of the enlargement of Yue's territory. But Fuchai, upon receiving the hemp cloth tribute from Yue, carried out his promise to enlarge Yue's land and also presented Yue with a banner adorned with feathers, a crossbow, and ceremonial garb appropriate to a feudal lord. The officials and populace of Yue were extremely pleased with the way things were going. All understood the Yue king's strategy for handling Fuchai and fully supported him in his efforts.¹⁹

Goujian made it clear to everyone high and low that they were not to talk openly of Yue's long-term plans. He led his people in replenishing the granaries and armories and in opening up new lands and plowing the soil, so that the populace might be enriched and the state strengthened. He also established a "brain trust" consisting of eight ministers and four friends, whom he regularly asked for advice on matters of governance. On one such occasion, Wen Zhong argued that the key to good governance was for the ruler to concern himself first and foremost with the well-being of the people (*aimin*). In response to this advice, Goujian relaxed the severity of Yue's

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Figure 3. Graphic Depiction of “Sleeping on Brushwood and Tasting Gall.”
Another variation. Source: Zhao Longzhi, *Goujian*.

laws and punishments and reduced taxes and levies, with the result that the conditions of the populace improved and all were willing to “buckle on their armor” and go to war to advance Yue’s interests.

In the first month of the ninth year of his reign (488 B.C.E.), the king of Yue summoned his five top ministers into his presence. He reminded them of Yue’s past defeat at the hands of Wu, the abandonment of the Yue ancestral shrine, and his own captivity—humiliations that were known among all the states. His thoughts were constantly fixed on seeking revenge against Wu, just as a lame person thinks constantly of being able to stand up and walk or a person who has lost the sight in both eyes thinks constantly of being able to see again. But he did not know what strategy was best and appealed to his ministers for guidance. Although there was some variation in the advice now proffered him, the general consensus was that Goujian should not reveal his intent to seek revenge against Wu until the time came to strike. Fuchai was an arrogant man, consumed by self-love. The conflict between Bo Pi and Wu Zixu was a fatal flaw that, in combination with Fuchai’s weaknesses as a ruler, would eventually bring about Wu’s fall. But, for the time being, Wu remained militarily powerful. Yue, therefore, should build up its strength in secret while continuing outwardly to demonstrate its loyalty to Wu, waiting patiently for the time when Wu, having exhausted itself in fighting against its rivals, Qi and Jin, was vulnerable and could be safely attacked. Goujian, after listening to the advice of his ministers, concluded that the right time to attack Wu had not yet come and expressed the hope that all would continue to carry on with their duties as before.²⁰

In the second month of the tenth year of his reign (487 B.C.E.), Goujian assembled all of his ministers. Still weighed down by his past humiliation and hunger for revenge, he had accepted the advice of his highest officials and begun the process of enriching the populace and strengthening the state. But it was now several years since his return to Yue²¹ and he had not heard of any warriors who were prepared to lay down their lives for him or officials who were able to avenge the wrongs and wipe out the humiliations he had suffered. Venting his impatience and frustration, Goujian faulted his ministers with being easy to get but hard to use.²²

Jiran (alt. Jiyan), a young, low-ranking official seated toward the rear, raised his hand and walked quickly up to the Yue king. “Wrong,” he said, boldly challenging Goujian, “the king’s words are wrong. It isn’t that ministers are easy to get but hard to use; rather, the problem lies in the king’s failure to use his ministers properly.” Goujian was not happy to hear this

and a look of shame crept over his face. He asked the other officials to withdraw and proceeded to question Jiran alone. Jiran observed that Fan Li had an excellent understanding of internal affairs while Wen Zhong was far sighted and skilled at prediction in external matters. He expressed the hope that the king would summon Wen Zhong and engage him in a full and comprehensive discussion, which he was sure would result in a plan for realizing Goujian's ultimate goal of becoming overlord.²³

Goujian called Wen Zhong in and, noting that this minister's advice had saved him from difficult situations in the past, asked him to recommend a plan for taking revenge against Wu. Wen Zhong replied that if Goujian wished to destroy Wu, the first thing to do would be to determine Fuchai's desires and indulge them; only after so doing would it be possible to acquire Wu's land and wealth. More concretely, there were nine stratagems for the king to consider—stratagems that had been used by King Tang of Shang and King Wen of Zhou in the course of their efforts to become kings, and by Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Mu of Qin in the course of their efforts to become overlords. As a result of their use of these stratagems, the conquest and occupation of a city or town had been as easy for them as removing their shoes. Wen Zhong hoped that Goujian would adopt the same measures himself.

The nine stratagems were as follows: (1) venerate Heaven and Earth and serve the ghosts and spirits respectfully so as to obtain the blessing and protection of each; (2) make gifts of valuable and expensive goods to the ruler of the enemy state and use large quantities of gold, jade, cotton, and silk to curry favor with the enemy state's ministers; (3) deplete the enemy state's granaries by purchasing fodder and grain from it at a high price and debilitate its population by indulging the enemy's desires; (4) present the enemy ruler with beautiful women in order to confound his thinking and disrupt his plans; (5) send skilled artisans and craftsmen and high-quality wood to the enemy state to enable it to construct palaces and towers and thereby exhaust its financial resources; (6) buy off enemy officials who are good at flattery to weaken the enemy's defenses against attack; (7) embolden enemy officials who dare to voice outspoken criticism to their ruler's face so that the ruler will force them to commit suicide; (8) bring prosperity to the king's own land and equip its armies with the best weapons; (9) train the king's own soldiers well so that they are ready to attack when the enemy forces have weakened.

If the king of Yue kept these nine stratagems secret, Wen Zhong concluded, and if he used his intelligence to gain complete mastery over them,

the whole world was his for the asking. What difficulty, then, should he have in bringing the lone state of Wu to its knees? Goujian was delighted with Wen Zhong's advice and immediately set about implementing the first stratagem, establishing shrines in a number of places to make sacrificial offerings to the gods in order to secure their support. During the many months in which he made such offerings, Yue was protected against adversity.

When Goujian asked Wen Zhong what stratagem he should try next, Wen Zhong observed that Fuchai was obsessed with constructing palaces and towers and had his workmen engage in such construction nonstop. The king should therefore make a selection of the finest wood and present it to Fuchai. Goujian had his woodworkers scour the hills for such wood and, once located, instructed his workman to cut, shape, polish, and decorate it. He then sent Wen Zhong to Wu to present the timber to Fuchai, who was, of course, overjoyed.

Fuchai's prime minister, Wu Zixu, on the other hand, was not pleased at all and entreated the king of Wu not to accept the wood. Formerly, he said, when Jie, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty, constructed the Ling Tower, and Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang, erected the Lu Tower, these actions caused *yin* and *yang* to be out of joint, winter and summer to come at the wrong times, and the grain not to ripen in the fields, resulting in calamities that brought privation to the people and misfortune to the state. In the end, these two rulers occasioned their own destruction. If Fuchai accepted the presentation from Yue, it would surely spell the end for the state of Wu.

Fuchai, predictably, paid no heed to Wu Zixu's remonstrance. He accepted the timber from Yue and incorporated it into the Gusu Palace,* which took five years to complete. The tower was so high that from the top one could see two hundred *li* in every direction. The workers recruited to construct it underwent enormous hardship and suffering. The common people were in a state of utter exhaustion, unable to earn a livelihood; the nobility were overcome with anguish. "Excellent," exclaimed Goujian, elated by how well the second of Wen Zhong's stratagems had worked.²⁴

In the eleventh year of his reign (486 B.C.E.) Goujian was still fixated on taking his revenge. He summoned Jiran and told him that although he wanted to attack Wu, he was worried that he might not be successful and therefore sought his guidance. Jiran responded with general advice about

**Gusu tai* in Chinese. The primary characteristic of the building was its great height; *tai* can be translated as "tower," but since the *Gusu tai* appears to have been used primarily as a royal dwelling, I have translated it as "palace."

preparing well in advance, making sure to select an auspicious time, and so on. When Goujian pressed him for more specific direction, Jiran elaborated on the four rules of death and the four rules of life, explaining them in terms of the relationship between the changing of the seasons and the agricultural cycle. Goujian asked Jiran how it was that one so young in years was so full of wisdom, to which Jiran, with characteristic immodesty, replied that ability and virtue had nothing to do with age. Goujian put his young minister's views into operation and in three years' time the supply of grain in Yue increased fivefold and the state was well on the way to prosperity. The king exclaimed that if he became overlord, it would be because of Jiran's sage counsel.²⁵

In the twelfth year of his reign (485 B.C.E.) Goujian told Wen Zhong that he had heard that Fuchai had a weakness for beautiful women and that, when indulging this passion, he completely disregarded the administering of his realm. The Yue king wondered whether by exploiting this failing it might not be possible to undermine Wu's defenses. Wen Zhong replied in the affirmative and, adding that Yue could count on the eloquence of the grand steward Bo Pi to weaken Fuchai even further, urged Goujian to select two beautiful women for presentation to the king of Wu. Accepting this advice, Goujian dispatched someone skilled at reading faces to scour the land. At Ningluo Mountain this person discovered two beautiful maidens, Xi Shi and Zheng Dan, and brought them back to the capital, where they were fitted with silk clothing and taught how to move gracefully and convey feeling in their facial expressions. Housed in a place several *li* east of Kuaiji, they practiced these things for three years, at which point they had become proficient enough to be presented to the king of Wu.²⁶

Goujian ordered Fan Li to escort the two beauties to Wu, where Fuchai received them with delight, seeing the gift as yet another sign of Goujian's loyalty. Wu Zixu remonstrated with Fuchai, warning him of the trouble that would ensue if he accepted Goujian's gift. The Wu prime minister described Goujian as a man who, day and night, thought of nothing other than his desire to destroy the state of Wu, a man who paid heed to good advice and surrounded himself with men of virtue and ability. Goujian had already assembled a force of tens of thousands of men who were prepared to die for Yue. In the heat of summer he donned garments made of fur and in winter he fended off the cold with nothing more than light cotton clothing. If a man of such resilience and determination were allowed to remain alive, he would surely become the instrument of Wu's destruction. Men of virtue and ability were a state's treasure, beautiful women the

source of a state's ruin. Fuchai should take warning from the fact that beautiful women had brought about the downfall of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties.

Fuchai, ignoring Wu Zixu's cautionary advice, accepted the gift of Xi Shi and Zheng Dan. When this was reported back to Goujian, the Yue ruler exclaimed, "Excellent! That takes care of the third stratagem."²⁷

In the thirteenth year of Goujian's reign (484 B.C.E.), the Yue king told Wen Zhong how pleased he was with the efficacy of the tactics thus far used to weaken Wu and asked what stratagem he should avail himself of next. Wen Zhong advised him to inform Fuchai that Yue had suffered a severe crop failure and wished to purchase grain from Wu. Goujian dispatched Wen Zhong to Wu with this message. Fuchai was strongly inclined, in light of the constancy of Goujian's allegiance to him, to grant Yue's request. Wu Zixu, convinced that the request was a trap, argued vehemently against accepting it. But his advice fell on deaf ears, leading the prime minister to solemnly predict that he would surely bear witness to the fall of Wu. Bo Pi now entered the fray, countering Wu Zixu's argument at every turn and accusing him, in Fuchai's presence, of being a small-minded official who in the past had consistently deceived the Wu king in order to satisfy his own interests and desires. Fuchai, finding Bo Pi's reasoning agreeable, announced that he was prepared to lend Yue ten thousand *dan* of grain, to be paid back when Yue experienced a bumper harvest. On Wen Zhong's return to Yue, Goujian gave the grain to his officials to distribute among the people. The following year, after the grain had ripened, the Yue king issued orders for the finest seeds to be selected and boiled. A quantity of grain equal to ten thousand *dan* was then transported to Wu. Fuchai was most pleased and gave instructions for the seeds to be planted. The farmers of Wu sowed the Yue seed, but since it had been sterilized it produced no crop, resulting in a severe famine.²⁸

Goujian, observing that Wu was in straitened circumstances, thought that this might be a propitious time to attack his nemesis. More than a decade had elapsed since his humiliating defeat at Mount Kuaiji and he was impatient for revenge. Wen Zhong, however, advised against any immediate action. Although it was true, he said, that Wu had begun to feel the pinch of poverty, it still had loyal ministers at court and Heaven had yet to give a clear signal concerning its fate. It was best, therefore, to wait for a more opportune moment.

Goujian then spoke with his prime minister. Fan Li had assembled boats and chariots for combat, the king noted, but these were defenseless against

swords, spears, and bows and arrows. Was it possible, he wondered, that Fan Li in his military planning had omitted something important? Fan Li replied that the great rulers of ancient times had all excelled at warfare, but in such specific matters as the arrangement of battle formations, the commanding of troops, and the beating of drums to signal advance and retreat, the difference between success and failure hinged entirely on the military skills of the troops themselves. Fan Li knew of a maiden from the forests of southern Yue whose swordsmanship was praised by all, and he urged the Yue ruler to send for her. Goujian thereupon sent emissaries to invite the maiden to come to the capital to demonstrate her skill in the use of the sword and halberd.

When the maiden arrived at court, Goujian asked her about her sword-handling skills. She told him that she had grown up in a wild, sparsely inhabited area, where there was no opportunity for formal study, but that her secret passion had always been swordplay. Nobody had instructed her. Her mastery had come all of a sudden out of nowhere. Goujian asked her for a detailed account of her technique. The maiden said that her technique was subtle yet quite simple, but that the meaning was veiled and profound. She then supplied a more elaborate explanation, concluding that after attaining proficiency in her technique one person could subdue a hundred persons in combat. Goujian was so delighted to hear all of this that he instantly gave the girl the name “Maiden of Yue” (Yue nü). He then issued orders for the commanding officers and best soldiers in his army to take instruction in sword-handling skills from her and, after achieving mastery, transmit them to the rank-and-file. Everyone at the time acclaimed the swordsmanship of the Maiden of Yue.²⁹

Fan Li next recommended an outstanding archer from the state of Chu named Chen Yin. When Chen Yin arrived at court, the king plied him with one question after another. He wanted to know about the origins of the bow and arrow, the history of its construction, the design of the cross-bow, the methods for achieving accuracy in shooting, the rules for aiming at a target from a distance, and the techniques for releasing several arrows simultaneously or one arrow at a time. Chen Yin supplied detailed answers to all of Goujian’s questions, holding nothing back. The king was elated and asked him if he would teach everything he knew to the warriors of Yue. Chen Yin replied that the secret to archery was hard work. If a person practiced diligently, he would be successful. Goujian thereupon sent Chen Yin to the capital’s northern outskirts to give instruction to the Yue army, and after three months had passed the entire army had mastered the techniques.

Later, when Chen Yin died, Goujian was greatly saddened. He had him buried on a hill west of the capital and named it Chen Yin Hill.³⁰

In the fifteenth year of his reign (482 B.C.E.), Goujian told Wen Zhong that he had persuaded the people of Yue to fully support an attack on Wu and asked him whether Heaven had yet provided a sign authorizing such action. Wen Zhong said that the source of Wu's strength all along had been the presence of Wu Zixu at court. Now, as a result of Wu Zixu's blunt and forthright remonstrations, Fuchai had ordered him to commit suicide.³¹ This was a sign from Heaven indicating that the time was ripe for Yue to attack Wu. Wen Zhong expressed the hope, therefore, that the king would devote himself wholeheartedly to preparing the people for war.

Goujian launched into a lengthy summation of all the things he had done over the years to win the hearts of the Yue people.³² He had begun, he reminded Wen Zhong, by publicly apologizing for having recklessly made an enemy of a large state (Wu) without first taking adequate account of Yue's own military circumstances (referring to Yue's catastrophic defeat at Fujiao). He assumed full responsibility for this failure, which had resulted in large-scale casualties among the people, and promised to amend his policies and methods of governing in the future. A major facet of the ensuing change had been his concerted effort to identify with the people of Yue and become intimately involved in their lives. He buried those who had died in battle, expressed sympathy and solicitude for the wounded, offered his condolences to the families of the bereaved and his congratulations to those marking happier occasions, saw people off who left for other states, and welcomed those who came from elsewhere to Yue.

After having brought an end to the disasters his people had suffered, Goujian had humbled himself by going to Wu to serve under Fuchai. Then, following his release from servitude and his receipt from the Wu king of a small piece of territory, one of his first acts had been to call the elders of the area together and announce policies designed to rehabilitate Yue. Seeking to increase Yue's population, he had forbidden young men to take older women as wives and older men to enter into marriage with women in their prime; he had made it a punishable offense for parents if a daughter, on reaching the age of seventeen, had still not been married off, or a son, on turning twenty, had still not taken a wife; he had made medical help available to pregnant women about to give birth; had rewarded the families of women who gave birth to two boys with a jug of wine and a dog, and the families of women who produced two girls with a jug of wine and a piglet; had provided a wet nurse to any family with a woman who had given birth

[place
fig. 4
around
here]



Figure 4. The Maiden of Yue Teaching Swordsmanship to a Yue Soldier. Source: Xiao Jun, *Wu Yue chungiu shihua* 2:467.

to triplets and, in the case of families with women who had borne twins, had offered assistance in raising one of the children. To ease the lot of those who had suffered misfortune, Goujian had exempted from taxes and corvée families that had lost sons (the exemption lasting for three years in the case of eldest sons and three months in the case of younger ones),³³ and buried the deceased with tears as if they were his own offspring; he had also provided for state assistance in the raising of children who had been orphaned or whose parents were sick or impoverished; and when, on his tours of inspection, he encountered poor children wandering about, he had given them food to eat and soup to drink and shown them kindness and asked their names.

Goujian went on to note that he ate only grain he himself had grown and wore only clothing his wife had made with her own hands. For ten years he had collected no land tax from the people and every household had a three-year supply of grain stored up.³⁴ The men of Yue sang for joy, the women wore smiles on their faces. Every day the family elders beseeched him: They recalled that Fuchai had disgraced him before the other feudal lords and that the people of other states had long ridiculed him. Now that Yue had, owing to his efforts, become prosperous, wasn't it time for him to permit them to take revenge on his behalf and wipe clean the old humiliation? Goujian at first had rejected the plea of his people, saying that the humiliation he had suffered in the past was no fault of theirs and that therefore it would be inappropriate to ask them to avenge it. They had persisted, however, likening themselves to the king's children and arguing that it was as natural for subjects to avenge a hatred on behalf of their ruler as it was for children to avenge an enmity on their father's behalf. Goujian at last gave in to their urging.

Wen Zhong, reversing his earlier advice, now argued that the time was still not ripe for Yue to launch an attack against Wu. Formerly, he had thought that once Wu achieved its goals against Qi and Jin, it would next attend to Yue. But a year had gone by and Fuchai seemed to have forgotten about Yue. His armies were exhausted and his people were faced with such privation that, with the onset of winter, they would likely have to migrate to the shores of the Eastern Sea in search of food to fend off starvation. Wen Zhong's divination made it clear that, despite all of this, if Yue sought to take advantage of Wu's present difficulties to attack it, it would provoke Fuchai's anger and not turn out well for Yue.

Goujian was caught between the advice of one of his highest officials and the sentiment of his people, which for three years had favored war with

Wu. The elders of Yue now once again implored him to attack Wu, arguing that even if Yue proved unable to defeat its nemesis, the fighting would further exhaust Wu's forces, Fuchai would sue for peace, and Yue could form an alliance with Wu that would significantly enhance Goujian's standing among the feudal lords. Goujian gave his consent to this. He then convoked a meeting of all his ministers and issued a command to the effect that henceforth all talk opposing an attack on Wu would be severely punished. Wen Zhong and Fan Li consulted together and agreed to submit to the king's command, even though it went against their advice. Goujian assembled his armies and delivered a warrior's exhortation. The family elders of Yue were overjoyed.³⁵

However, when Goujian again summoned Fan Li and asked him whether this was a good time to attack Wu, the prime minister said it would be better to wait until the following spring. Fuchai, he said, had gone north to Huangchi (in modern Fengqiu county, Henan) for a meeting with the other rulers and had taken his best troops with him, leaving the crown prince behind with a force of old and weak soldiers to defend Wu. But since he had left very recently and was still not far from Wu's borders, were it to be reported to him that Yue had taken advantage of his absence to launch a surprise attack, it would be an easy matter for him to turn around and come back. Better, therefore, to hold off until spring.

That summer—it was still the fifteenth year of Goujian's reign (482 B.C.E.)—the king again inquired of Fan Li whether the time was ripe to attack Wu; this time, Fan Li said yes.³⁶ Goujian thereupon dispatched a force totaling almost fifty thousand troops and engaged the Wu defenders in battle. The Wu crown prince was captured and immediately put to death. Yue forces then entered the Wu capital and set fire to Fuchai's beloved Gusu Palace. Messengers were sent north to report this news to Fuchai. But Fuchai, fearing that he would never be chosen overlord if the other kings got wind of what had happened, kept everything quiet until the meeting was over. At that point he sent emissaries to Yue to sue for peace, which Goujian, recognizing that he was not yet strong enough to annihilate Wu, welcomed.³⁷

Six years now passed, and in the seventh month of the twenty-first year of his reign (476 B.C.E.) Goujian had once again readied the Yue military for a punitive expedition against Wu. But before acting, he sought advice from his top ministers and from a visiting official from the state of Chu concerning the factors most likely to ensure the success of his endeavor.³⁸ After hearing their recommendations, he withdrew to prepare himself for the offering of sacrifices to his ancestors and the gods. He sent an emissary

to the Zhou court to announce his intention to punish an unprincipled state so that the rulers of the other states would not begrudge him. Then he issued a formal command to the people of Yue, announcing that those who reported for action within five days were his subjects in good standing, while those who took more than five days to report were not his subjects and would be punished with death.

After issuing this command, Goujian went into the palace to give final instructions to his wife. Henceforth, he told her, internal palace matters were not to be reported outside and external military matters were not to be communicated to people in the palace. If something disgraceful happened in the palace, that was her responsibility; if, far away from Yue, his armies were humiliated in battle, that was his responsibility. He warned her not to take lightly what he had said. After leaving the inner palace, Goujian met with his ministers in the outer court. He warned them that if they were not equitable in their provisioning of the scholar class and if the agricultural lands were not brought under cultivation properly, resulting in a disgrace to him on the home front, the onus would be on them; if his soldiers did not engage the enemy or if when fighting they were afraid to die, resulting in the humiliation of Yue before the other feudal lords and the sully of its past achievements before the world, the responsibility for that would be his. Henceforth, matters of domestic governance were not to be communicated outside Yue and external military matters were not to be reported to people at home.³⁹

Goujian took seriously the need to instill fear into the Yue army. In the course of reviewing his forces prior to leaving the capital, he had three criminals publicly beheaded and then announced to the troops that this was the treatment that would be meted out to those who disobeyed his orders. The following day, in the countryside outside the city, he had three more criminals put to death and repeated the same announcement. He then invited family members who had come from other parts to bid their sons and brothers farewell and ordered those who lived in the capital to come out and say good-bye to their sons and brothers. Those present, grieving in the knowledge that they were likely never to see their loved ones again, composed a song to boost the men's spirits and remind everyone that the object of the expedition was to wipe clean the humiliation their king had suffered years before. The following day, with his army camped at the Yue border, Goujian again had three criminals beheaded in the presence of all as a warning to those who did not submit to his commands. Three days later, after taking his forces to Zuili (in modern Jiaying county, Zhejiang), he again had

three criminals beheaded, announcing to the troops that this was how those whose thoughts and behavior were wicked and who were unable to withstand the enemy were to be dealt with.

Then the Yue king, showing his more compassionate side, ordered his officials to make a survey of the entire army to find out the names of all soldiers with parents but no brothers. Because of the important punitive expedition in which they were taking part, he had caused them to be separated from the parents who had raised them and family members of the older generation who had nurtured and loved them to throw themselves into the task of meeting a grave danger to the state of Yue. He wanted them to know that if, during the time that they were engaged in fighting the enemy, one of their parents were to fall ill, he would deal with it as if it were his own parent, and if a parent were unfortunately to die, he would carry the coffin and bury that parent as if it were his own.⁴⁰ A few days later, Goujian, after moving his armies to Jiangnan, demonstrated both the hard and soft sides of his complex character. After having five more criminals beheaded, he declared to his warriors that he cherished them as much as if they were his own sons, but that if someone committed a capital offense, even if it were his own son, he could not pardon it.

For all his severity, Goujian worried that if his warriors were motivated only by fear of punishment and not by heartfelt conviction, it would be hard to mold them into an effective fighting force. He felt that he had still not succeeded in instilling in them a true spirit of willingness to risk their lives for something larger than themselves. Just as he was mulling this over, he spied a frog by the roadside, beating its belly in anger and filled with the spirit of one about to do battle. Goujian stood up in his carriage and saluted the frog. When one of his soldiers asked him why he was showing respect for a miserable little creature, he said that he had long hoped for an expression of anger on the part of his men but had not yet found any who were in full concurrence with his mission. The frog he had just seen was an ignorant animal, but when it encountered an enemy it became infuriated, and so he had shown it a sign of respect. Upon hearing of this incident, all of the warriors committed themselves to a spirit of sacrifice and resolved to lay down their lives for their king.⁴¹

In the ensuing months, Yue, with Goujian in command, engaged Wu in battle after battle, each time emerging victorious, and finally besieging Fuchai's forces in the western part of the Wu capital. Initially Goujian wanted to enter the Wu capital via the Xu Gate (the entrance on the south side of the city). As his men approached the gate, however, they looked up

and saw suspended from the top of the south wall the head of Wu Zixu, as large as a chariot wheel, with flashing eyes and hair hanging downward on all sides, so incandescent that it could be seen from a distance of ten *li*. Terrified, the Yue armies stopped and camped for the night by the roadside. At midnight a terrific storm suddenly struck, causing grave damage and forcing the troops to retreat to Songling. The bodies of the dead lay all about and the troops scattered in every direction, yet there was no way to bring the devastation to a halt.

At this juncture, Fan Li and Wen Zhong, removing their upper garments and performing a *ketou*, expressed their gratitude to Wu Zixu and begged him to show them a way out of the disaster consuming the Yue force.* Wu Zixu then appeared to them in a dream. He told them that he had long known that the Yue armies were certain to attack the Wu capital and therefore, just before dying, had requested that his head be placed atop the south wall of the city so that he could personally witness the destruction of Wu. His only thought at the time had been to put Fuchai in a difficult position. But when the Yue force was on the point of entering the Wu capital, it was too painful for him to bear and so he had created a horrific storm to frighten Yue into retreating. The fact was, however, that Yue's punishment of Wu was Heaven's will and was not something he could stop. If the Yue army wished to enter the Wu capital, it should alter its plan and go in via the east gate, which he himself would open. The following day, acting on Wu Zixu's instructions, the Yue army made its way to the east gate and surrounded the army of Wu.⁴²

Goujian's army persisted in the war against Wu for three years,⁴³ winning one engagement after another and eventually forcing Fuchai to hide away on the top of Mount Guxu (alt. Gusu or Guyu; located southwest of Suzhou in modern Jiangsu). The Wu ruler then sent an emissary to make peace with Goujian, recalling that years before he, Fuchai, had given offense to Goujian at Mount Kuaiji and that he would not now dare to flout the Yue king's command. If Goujian wished to lead his army forward to attack him, he would submit; alternatively, if Goujian was willing to pardon him, he was prepared, along with his ministers, to enter a condition of servitude under the Yue king, much as Goujian himself had earlier done in the aftermath of the Mount Kuaiji affair.

*To strip off one's upper garments was a ritual demonstration of submission, used to apologize for an offense and request forgiveness. See Huang Rensheng, *Xin yi Wu Yue chunqiu*, 344, n. 5.

After hearing this, Goujian did not have the heart to treat Fuchai with the ultimate sanction and seemed on the point of accepting his offer of peace negotiations. However, Fan Li, observing that his king was softening, interjected that at the time of the Mount Kuaiji defeat, Heaven had bestowed Yue on Wu, but Wu had not accepted it. Now Heaven was bestowing Wu on Yue. Could Yue possibly go against the will of Heaven? What was more, the Yue king every day from morning until night had held court and attended to governmental matters, gnashing his teeth in pent-up anger. Was not the strategizing that he had engaged in for twenty long years directed precisely at bringing about the present state of affairs? Now that the object of all his efforts was in his grasp, how could he consider throwing it aside? If he did not accept what Heaven had bestowed on him, he would surely suffer Heaven's punishment. The king must not forget the misery he had suffered at Mount Kuaiji.

Goujian told Fan Li that it was his intention to follow his advice, but that he could not bear to respond to Fuchai's envoy in such a direct fashion. On learning this, Fan Li sounded the war drums and called in soldiers. He announced that the Yue king had entrusted him to deal with the matter and instructed the Wu envoy to leave at once or risk his displeasure. The envoy left in tears. Taking pity on Fuchai, Goujian then sent an envoy to Mount Guxu to tell the Wu king that he was willing to arrange for him and his wife to go to Yongdong (Zhoushan Island in modern Zhejiang) to live and would allot them three hundred families to wait upon them for the rest of their days. Fuchai rejected Goujian's offer, saying that the calamity that Heaven had unleashed on Wu had taken place while he was on the throne. His altars to the earth and grain gods and his ancestral temple had been destroyed and Wu's land and people already incorporated into the state of Yue. He was an old man and unable to become Goujian's servant. He then took a sword and killed himself.⁴⁴

After Yue's destruction of Wu (473 B.C.E.), Goujian led his armies north across the Yangzi and Huai rivers. He met with the rulers of Qi and Jin in Xuzhou (in the state of Qi, south of Teng county in modern Shandong) and also presented tribute to the Zhou court. After his new status was confirmed by the Zhou king, he returned with his troops to Jiangnan. He conferred territory in the Huai River valley on Chu; he restored to Song the lands originally belonging to it that Wu had conquered; and he conferred on Lu an area one hundred *li* in circumference in the southeastern part of modern Shandong. At this point in time the Yue armies had free run of the entire area encompassed by the Huai and Yangzi river valleys.

The rulers of the other states offered their congratulations to Goujian and proclaimed him overlord.⁴⁵

As he was about to lead his army back to Wu, Goujian turned to Fan Li and asked his prime minister how it was that his advice always accorded with the Way of Heaven. Fan Li replied that it was because his counsel was based on the theories of the goddess Su Nü (an alleged contemporary of the Yellow Emperor). After he had elaborated further on this, Goujian asked whether, if he were to proclaim himself *wang* (king),⁴⁶ Fan Li could predict the outcome. Fan Li replied that the Yue ruler must not proclaim himself *wang*. Formerly, Fuchai had done that, exceeding his proper status and transgressing on the title of the Son of Heaven (the Zhou king), and as a result there was an eclipse of the sun. If Goujian now, instead of leading his army back to Yue, decided to follow in Fuchai's path, it was to be feared that there would again be an abnormal heavenly event.

Paying no heed to Fan Li's words, Goujian led his troops back to the Wu capital and gave a great banquet at Wen Tower for all his ministers. He asked the musicians to compose a song in honor of Yue's destruction of Wu. After the musicians began, Fan Li and Wen Zhong joined in; Wen Zhong then offered a toast to the Yue king, the overall effect of which, while celebratory, was to emphasize closure: it was now time, he intimated, to return home and reward all the meritorious officials who had contributed to Yue's triumph. The other ministers, jubilant, all smiled, but Goujian, hoping to extend his successes still further, remained silent, a look of displeasure crossing his face.

Fan Li understood that what Goujian coveted was territory, and that for the sake of territory he was prepared to sacrifice the lives of his ministers. Originally Fan Li had intended, while they were still in the Wu capital, to take his leave of the Yue king at that point. But he decided that it was his duty to accompany Goujian back to Yue first. On the way back he tried to persuade Wen Zhong that he too should leave, as Goujian was surely going to have him killed. Wen Zhong was unconvinced. So Fan Li wrote him a letter in which, characteristically, he likened the ups and downs of human life to the cyclical course of nature. Just as spring was the season when things grew and winter the time when things perished, when the fortunes of men reached their high point, they were bound to move in the opposite direction. Although he, Fan Li, had no special aptitude, he understood well the principle of advance and retreat. When the soaring birds have been felled, the archer puts away his trusty bow; when the cunning hares have been snared, the good dog is thrown into the pot. Goujian was mean and

sinister in appearance (literally, “long necked and sharp tongued”), with hawk-like eyes and the movement of a wolf. You could share hardship and adversity with such a man, but not peace and happiness. Therefore, if Wen Zhong valued his life, he should leave. Wen Zhong, after reading Fan Li’s letter, still was not persuaded.

On the day *dingwei* of the ninth month of the twenty-fourth year of Goujian’s reign (473 B.C.E.) Fan Li requested of the Yue ruler that he be permitted to take leave of him. After listening to his prime minister’s long, self-deprecating farewell speech in which he reviewed the high points of his service, Goujian, overcome with sadness, said that Fan Li’s departure would be a terrible blow both to the state of Yue and to him. If he would reconsider, Goujian proposed to confer half of his state on him so that they could rule Yue together. If he remained steadfast in his decision to leave, however, his wife and offspring would be punished with death. Fan Li said that his decision was firm, but asked Goujian why it was necessary to punish his wife and children. He urged the king to make every effort to act in a moral way and bade him farewell. Fan Li boarded a small boat and left; to where, no one knew.⁴⁷

After Fan Li’s departure, Goujian was most unhappy. He summoned Wen Zhong and asked him whether he should try to convince Fan Li to return. Wen Zhong said that that was impossible, that Fan Li could not be made to come back, and went into an elaborate cosmological justification as to why. Goujian, apparently persuaded, placed Fan Li’s wife and children under his own care, conferring on them a piece of territory one hundred square *li* in size and announcing that anyone who made trouble for them would suffer the punishment of Heaven. He also had his artisans fashion a bronze statue of Fan Li, which he had placed next to where he sat so that he could discuss governmental affairs with him from dawn to dusk.⁴⁸

Subsequently, Jiran pretended to go mad while the other ministers became more and more estranged from Goujian and no longer attended court in person. Wen Zhong, who was very concerned, also failed to appear in court. Someone then slandered Wen Zhong, saying to Goujian that, after having wholeheartedly assisted the Yue ruler in his quest to be proclaimed overlord, he was resentful over the fact that he had neither been promoted to a higher official position nor granted additional titles. Because he could not keep his anger from showing in his expression, he stayed away from court. At a later point, Wen Zhong himself came before Goujian and asked him, now that he had achieved his long-term goal of destroying the state

of Wu, whether there was anything else that he was worried about. Goujian remained silent. In point of fact, there was indeed a problem. Duke Ai of Lu, who faced a revolt within his state, had sought Yue's assistance, but Goujian, worried that Wen Zhong might be plotting against him, had been reluctant to send his army away from Yue.

In the twenty-fifth year of Goujian's reign (472 B.C.E.), the king summoned Wen Zhong to court and asked him what sort of man he thought he was. Wen Zhong knew that this spelled trouble. He enumerated some of his qualities that he suspected had rubbed the king the wrong way, but said that he was not the kind of person who loved life and feared death so much that he would fail to speak his mind just because it might give offense. Formerly, Wu Zixu, just prior to being forced to take his life, had said to Fuchai that after the clever hares have been caught, the hound is thrown into the kettle to boil, and when the enemy states have been destroyed, the ministers whose planning brought this result about are inevitably put to death. Fan Li, on the way back from Wu to Yue, had told him much the same thing. Wen Zhong concluded by informing the Yue king that he understood his real intention. When his remarks were met by silence, he felt he had nothing more to say and withdrew.

When Wen Zhong returned to his residence his wife asked him what was wrong. Wen Zhong told her that the king failed to recognize his worth. The nine stratagems that he had outlined to Goujian and that had played such a critical part in Yue's ultimate triumph over Wu were evidence enough of his loyalty, but were completely overlooked by Goujian. He told his wife that he was certain to be called back to court and that that would doubtless be the last she would see of him.

Goujian did indeed summon Wen Zhong to court again and, as expected, handed him a sword with which to take his life. Wen Zhong, before doing so, caustically observed that in the future, during times of decline, loyal ministers would be sure to treat him as a trope for the devoted but unappreciated official. He then drew the sword and killed himself.

Goujian provided Wen Zhong with an elaborate burial in the hills west of the capital. After he had been in the ground for a year, Wu Zixu came from the sea and, passing right through the hillside, carried Wen Zhong back with him. Thereafter, the two men floated together on the surface of the ocean's waters. When the tide came in the first wave was Wu Zixu; the second wave following close behind was Wen Zhong.⁴⁹

After forcing death upon the loyal Wen Zhong, Goujian was proclaimed

overlord of the area east of the Hangu Pass (in modern Henan province) and moved the capital of Yue to Langye (in the eastern part of modern Shandong). Here he built an observation tower measuring seven *li* in circumference so that he could see the Eastern Sea and gathered around him eight thousand brave soldiers and three hundred warships outfitted with axes and spears. Before long he put out a call for men of virtue to come to Yue. Confucius, hearing of this, led his disciples to Langye to perform music on ancient instruments for the Yue king.⁵⁰ Goujian, in full military regalia, met him at the entrance to the capital, along with an honor guard of three hundred soldiers. When Goujian somewhat impatiently asked what Confucius could teach him, Confucius replied that he could convey the principles of governance followed by the Five Emperors and the Three Kings, and that it was his intention to do so through a performance of the instruments used in their day. Heaving a long sigh, Goujian said that the men of Yue were by nature coarse and without grace. When they went places they went by boat; at home, they lived in the hills. Boats were their carts, oars their horses. When they charged forward they were as swift and violent as a whirlwind; when they withdrew they were impossible to pursue. They were fond of weaponry and were unafraid to die in battle. What, he wondered, did Confucius have to teach such men? Confucius did not respond. He bade farewell and left Yue.

Goujian sent some men to Mount Muke (in modern Shaoxing, Zhejiang) to exhume the remains of his father Yuanchang (alt. Yunchang) so that they could be reinterred in Langye. But when after three attempts the gravediggers finally penetrated the burial chamber, a violent wind blew forth sending sand and stones flying in all directions and preventing them from entering. Concluding that his late father did not wish to have his remains moved, Goujian abandoned the project.

The remaining years of Goujian's time as overlord were spent in military and diplomatic activities of one sort or another. In 465 B.C.E., when he was in his mid-fifties, he fell seriously ill. Summoning the crown prince into his presence, he recounted how Yue, with the support of Heaven and the gods, had grown from a wretched little state to its then triumphant position, destroying along the way the state of Wu and asserting its authority over Qi, Jin, and the other states to the north. But accomplishments of this sort, he cautioned, invariably carried their own warning. It was extremely difficult for the successor of an overlord to perpetuate his successes, and so the crown prince must exercise the greatest vigilance. After he finished speaking, Goujian breathed his last.⁵¹

The Goujian we encounter in Chinese antiquity is nothing if not complicated. In his treatment of the people of Yue following his defeat at Mount Kuaiji and again after returning from his three-year internment in Wu, Goujian demonstrated considerable sensitivity and compassion, introducing social, economic, and legal measures designed to ease the lot of his subjects, enrich them, and earn their support. But he was also capable of unbelievable cruelty, not only toward his enemies but even toward his own people. The instances of this contained in *The Annals of Wu and Yue* are fairly tame compared to some of the stories that circulated closer to Goujian's day. Here, for example, is what the philosopher Mozi (468–376 B.C.E.), who was born around the time that Goujian died, had to say:

King Goujian of Yue admired bravery and for three years trained his soldiers and subjects to be brave. But he was not sure whether they had understood the true meaning of bravery, and so he set fire to his warships and then sounded the drum to advance. The soldiers trampled each other down in their haste to go forward, and countless numbers of them perished in the fire and water. . . . The soldiers of Yue were truly astonishing. . . . Consigning one's body to the flames is a difficult thing to do, and yet they did it because it pleased the king of Yue.⁵²

Another instance of Goujian's cruelty toward his own people came early in his reign when, in responding to the attack of King Helu of Wu, he sent three waves of convicted criminals toward the Wu front lines, where with a great shout they proceeded to cut their own throats. While the Wu forces stood stupefied, the Yue army launched a surprise attack from another direction, defeating Wu and mortally wounding Helu himself.⁵³

As these examples suggest, Goujian was, perhaps more than anything, a man of war. The encounter with Confucius dramatically attests to this, as does much else in *The Annals of Wu and Yue*. But "warfare" for Goujian was not just a matter of bravery and brutally enforced discipline, of warships and swordsmanship and archery. As important as these things were, his strategizing also placed a great deal of emphasis on weakening his adversary in every conceivable way: economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. And, in the pursuit of this objective, guided by his ministerial advisers, he was not above (indeed, he took a certain ghoulish delight in) resorting to such tactics as deception, trickery, lying, and bribery.

Unlike his archenemy Fuchai, Goujian did not crave luxury. Both dur-

ing his confinement in Wu and after, he demonstrated his willingness and ability to engage in the most humble forms of physical activity. He also acquired a reputation for his capacity to endure privation and discomfort, whether enforced or self-imposed. And, again in dramatic contrast to the king of Wu (and many another Chinese ruler over the centuries), he seemed impervious to the distractions of sex.

Perhaps the most intriguing dissimilarity between Goujian and Fuchai was in their relationships to their top ministers. Where Fuchai again and again rebuffed the tough-minded, unsentimental, truth-speaking counsel of Wu Zixu and followed that of the corrupt and self-serving Bo Pi, Goujian, both during and after his captivity, attached great weight to the advice of Fan Li and Wen Zhong and repeatedly expressed his gratitude to them for their loyal service. He did not, moreover, rely solely on these two dedicated officials; he also showed himself ready and willing to accept instruction from other less likely sources. After voicing his complaint that ministers were easy to get but hard to use, he listened attentively when the brash, young, low-ranking minister Jiran told him that the problem was not that his ministers were hard to use but, rather, that he needed to learn how to use them better. He also welcomed with enthusiasm the contributions of people of unusual talent, regardless of their social background or gender, as long as they had skills that could be of benefit to Yue. In brief, Goujian exemplified in his behavior one of the qualities that Chinese political thought has always viewed as indispensable to successful rule: the recognition and proper use of people of ability.

But the relationship between Goujian and his ministers also had its problems. It became instantly clear to Fan Li—but not, alas, to the less-prescient Wen Zhong—that, once the Yue king had succeeded in the consuming goal of avenging himself against Wu, he would have no further use for either him or his other leading ministers. A few centuries later, after General Han Xin, through exceptional merit and cunning, had played a key role in enabling Liu Bang to defeat his rivals and save the newly established Han dynasty, a wise man from Qi, alluding to the earlier example of Goujian's treatment of Fan Li and Wen Zhong, tried to persuade Han Xin to revolt against the new emperor: "Your position is that of a subject, and yet you possess power enough to make a sovereign tremble and a name which resounds throughout the world. This is why I consider that you are in danger! . . . Merit is difficult to achieve and easy to lose. The right time is hard to find and easy to let slip. The time, my lord, the time! It will not come twice! I beg you to consider carefully!"⁵⁴ Han Xin was not persuaded. Fan Li also

had no desire to revolt against Goujian. But he knew his master well and sensed, after the demise of Wu, that the unbridled ambition and envious nature of the Yue king would make life extremely dangerous for anyone in his entourage who had accumulated great merit. And so, demonstrating the resoluteness and sense of timing that were two of his most striking qualities, Fan Li left Yue and reinvented himself in another life.

The central story line that threads through the saga of Goujian is, of course, the quest for revenge.⁵⁵ This theme extends beyond Goujian himself. Fuchai, after Goujian's soldiers had mortally wounded his father, vowed to avenge this act—a vow that was consummated in 494 B.C.E. with his humiliating encirclement of Goujian's forces at Mount Kuaiji. And Wu Zixu, originally from Chu, left his native state and placed himself at the service of Chu's enemy Wu after the king of Chu had had both Wu Zixu's father and elder brother put to death. When the army of Wu eventually vanquished Chu, Wu Zixu (according to a number of accounts) dug up the king's body and "whipped it three hundred times before he stopped," in symbolic retaliation for the earlier wrong.⁵⁶ In both of these instances, resentment and hatred were triggered by the death of a father (as well as, in Wu Zixu's case, an older brother), so that the act of revenge may be viewed as an expression ultimately of filial feeling and obligation. By contrast, in the case of Goujian, it was an affront to the young king's pride and dignity, rather than the killing of an immediate family member, that was the triggering event. Instead of filial piety, it was personal humiliation that fueled Goujian's desire for revenge.⁵⁷

Humiliation, as we have seen, is one of the more involved and complicated aspects of the entire Goujian story. As something externally imposed on the Yue king—the original defeat by Wu—it served as a crucial driving force behind Goujian's quest for revenge against Fuchai. But it also had a self-imposed aspect, insofar as Goujian, in order to realize his immediate and long-range objectives, willingly submitted to becoming a prisoner-slave in Wu; to cleaning his master's stables and driving his chariot; and, most stunningly, in an elaborately concocted ruse designed to soften Fuchai and win his confidence, to tasting the Wu king's urine and excrement for prognostic purposes. The self-inflicted dimension of humiliation also carried over to the period after Goujian's release from captivity, when, in order to build Fuchai's trust and allay any fears he might entertain concerning Yue's growing prosperity and strength, Goujian became the very picture of the submissive, ingratiating lesser lord. The core idea here, nicely encapsulated in the proverb *renru fuzhong* (literally, "to endure humiliation in order to

[place fig.
5 around
here]



Figure 5. Wu Zixu Whipping the Corpse of King Ping of Chu. Source: *Shibao* (The truth post), Aug. 30, 1934.

carry out an important task”), is that there is a higher order of courage that will cause an exceptional individual to acquiesce in the most degrading forms of humiliation or indignity, if, by so doing, the possibility of attaining some greater end will be enhanced.⁵⁸

Chinese history is filled with examples of this kind of courage. In the *Shiji* biography of Han Xin, we are told that in Han Xin’s youth, when he was still a poor commoner, a butcher taunted him one day saying, “You are big and tall and love to carry a sword, but at heart you’re nothing but a coward!” He insulted Han Xin before a crowd of people and then said, “If you feel like dying, come on and attack me! If not, then crawl between my legs!” Han Xin bent down and crawled between the young butcher’s legs, prompting a roar of laughter from the crowd at his expense. Years later, after Han Xin had become one of the most important people in the empire, he summoned the man who had humiliated him and made him a military commander. “‘He is a brave man,’ Han Xin told his generals and ministers. ‘At the time when he humiliated me, I could of course have killed him. But killing him would have won me no fame. So I put up with it and got where I am today.’”⁵⁹

[place fig. 6
around here]

Another example, well known to every student of Chinese history, is that of the great historian Sima Qian (145–90 B.C.E.). As a result of his spirited defense of the general Li Ling (who after defeat in battle had surrendered to the Xiongnu), Sima offended the reigning emperor (Han Emperor Wu) and was offered a choice of punishments: suicide or castration. Although in such circumstances it was expected that someone of Sima’s high standing would choose suicide, he opted instead for the dishonorable alternative of castration, preferring, as he wrote in a moving letter to his friend Ren An, to go to prison and live out his life in shame in order to be able to complete his magisterial *Shiji*.⁶⁰ “A man has only one death,” Sima observed in the letter. “That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends upon the way he uses it.”⁶¹

Sima Qian’s comment on Wu Zixu’s avenging of his father’s death is interesting in this connection. King Ping of Chu, holding Wu Zixu’s father, Wu She, hostage, had summoned Wu and his older brother, stating that if they came he would spare their father, but that if they failed to come he would kill him. When the brothers consulted, Wu Zixu said: “When the two sons arrive, father and sons will die together. How can this save father from death? If we go, it will only make it impossible for us to avenge this wrong. It would be better to flee to another state and borrow its strength to wipe out father’s disgrace. To perish together is of no avail.” Moved by



Figure 6. Han Xin Crawling between the Butcher's Legs. Source: *Ertong shijie* 24, no. 11 (Sept. 14, 1929).

Wu Zixu's hard choice, which, although the circumstances were different, was not entirely unlike his own, Sima Qian ventured the following thought: If Wu had "accompanied [his father] She in death, how would he differ from an ant or mole-cricket? Casting aside a lesser duty, he wiped clean a great disgrace, and his name has endured through later generations."⁶²

An example of a quite different sort, drawn from the more recent period of Chinese history, is supplied by Zhou Enlai. In May 1927 a left-wing Guomindang commander ordered his men to fire on strikers in Changsha, killing over one hundred Communists. His commissar, a Communist named Liu Ning, mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign to denounce the commander as a murderer. When Zhou, who was head of the Communist Party's Military Department at the time, saw Liu's posters in Hankou (where the left-wing Guomindang and the Communists had set up a rival government), he chastised him for exacerbating the already strained relationship between the Communists and the left-wing Guomindang. "What do you mean?" Liu protested. "Are we somebody's concubine? Are we to accept their spit-

ting and beating without any right to speak up in protest?” “Comrade Liu,” Zhou admonished, “we must be patient. For the sake of our revolution we must be very patient. For the sake of our revolution we can play the role of a concubine, even of a prostitute, if need be.”⁶³

Implicit in all of these examples is a distinction between two modes of behavior. One is marked by impetuosity and shortsightedness. Those who display it, unable to abide even for a moment an insult or affront, respond hastily and without reflection, satisfying an immediate emotional need or moral imperative, but in the process relinquishing (or at least jeopardizing) the possibility of achieving some larger, more important objective. In the other mode, which is completely different in nature, the emphasis is on forbearance and self-control. Its practitioners demonstrate infinite patience and thoughtful consideration of long-term consequences, coupled with a willingness to accept any indignity or humiliation or privation or embarrassment, provided that by so doing the chances of realizing an ultimate goal are enhanced.⁶⁴ Despite his periodic bouts of impatience, it was this latter sort of behavior that Goujian personified, enabling him over many years to rebuild Yue to the point where it was able to triumph over a far larger and more potent rival and thus avenge the wrongs it had repeatedly suffered at Wu’s hands. Two and a half millennia later, this trajectory of success, so improbable at the outset, made the Yue king a powerful example for embattled Chinese in the twentieth century.