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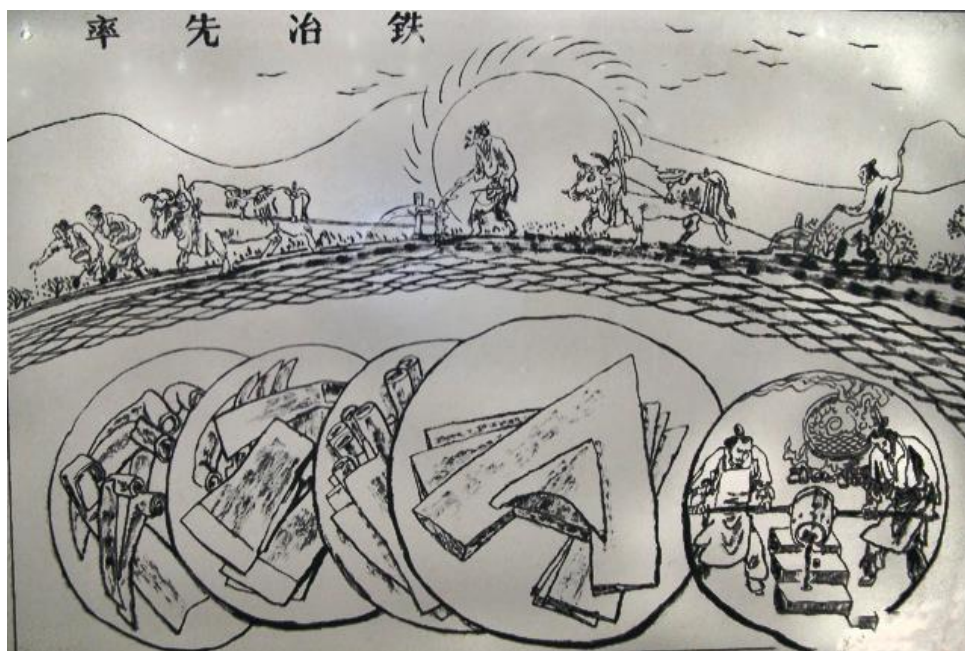


RIISING ASIA
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Special Issue
Tales From The Principalities
Ancient Chinese Short Stories

ALL STORIES ARE TRANSLATED BY ERIC HENRY

CHAPTER NINE TALES FROM WÚ AND YUÈ



A representation of farming with iron implements. Ink painting in the Zibo Chinese Ceramics Museum, Zibo city, Shandong Province, Summer, 2007. Artist unknown. Image edited by David Henry.

The nine items in this section come from “Tales from Wú” (two items), “Tales from Yuè,” Book 1 (a single item), and “Tales from Yuè,” Book 2 (six items).

Wú 吳 and Yuè 越 were unknown to the other States of early China until they rose to prominence in the closing decades of the Spring and Autumn Era. Geographically, they were neighbors, Wú being located in the southern part of modern Jiāngsū Province and Yuè in the northern part of Zhèjiāng Province. The native people of those two States were not Chinese. The language they spoke had no relation to Chinese, and their customs differed radically from those of the Chinese States. Neither the Rulers nor the common people in those two States had surnames, and no Record-keepers or Archivists (sǐ 史) were employed in their Courts. No posthumous designations were conferred on their deceased Rulers. Both were offshoots of a culture that had been extremely widespread for more than a thousand years throughout what is now Southeast China.

Wú, at different times, had different capital cities, of which the most well-known, built under the Wú Ruler, King Hél ŭ, was Gūsū 姑蘇, located in or around the modern city of Sūzhōu in Jiāngsū Province. Yuè also had various capitals, the most well-known of which was Kuàijī, located in the area of the modern city of Shàoxīng in Zhèjiāng Province. Activities of the Ruling House in Yuè, however, were dispersed, and not confined to a single capital area.

In order to facilitate relations with Chinese States, both Wú and Yuè invented Chinese origin stories for themselves. The Rulers of Wú laid claim to the Zhōu royal surname of Jī 姬, saying that they were ultimately descended from Wú Tàibó, the eldest son of a predynastic Zhōu Ruler, and the Yuè Rulers, not to be outdone, laid claim to the surname Sī 姒, associated with the extremely ancient, and quasi-mythical Xià Dynasty, saying that their Rulers were descendants of Wú Yú 無余, the son of a

Ruler who, according to legend, restored his clan's possession of the Xià throne after a lengthy period of usurpation.

Though they were technically Viscounts (zǐ 子), the Rulers of Wú and Yuè, like the Rulers of Chǔ, called themselves “King” (wáng 王). In the native language of the people of Wú and Yuè, the names of both States consisted of two syllables rather than one. “Wú” was “Gou Wú” 句吳 and Yuè was “Yú Yuè” 於越 (or 于越). ~ Eric Henry.

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

64. Self-inflicted Death as Political Expression

This tale consists of a depiction of the most famous suicide in Chinese historical legend. It is a selection from “Tales from Wú” which occupies only one fascicle, no. 19, in the entire work. The central figure in this tale, Wǔ Zǐ Xū, was originally a nobleman of Chǔ, who fled that State after his father was unjustly put to death by a Chǔ King. After arriving in Wú as a refugee, he dedicated the rest of his life to avenging his father's death and building up the strength of Wú. In Wú, he served two Rulers in succession, King Hélú, and then his son King Fūchāi. Under King Hélú, he built up the military strength of his adopted State, which enabled Wú, in 506, to invade Chǔ and seize its capital city, Yǐng, forcing the current Chǔ King to flee elsewhere. On that occasion, Wǔ Zǐ Xū also dug up the tomb of the Chǔ King who had killed his father, and had three hundred lashes administered to the corpse. In the years that ensued, Wú's southern neighbor Yuè grew strong and began to clash militarily with Wú. In one of those clashes King Hélú was mortally wounded and died in 496, whereupon his son Fūchāi assumed the throne. Two years later, in 494, anxious to avenge his father, Fūchāi inflicted a decisive defeat on Yuè, and the Yuè King Gōujiàn was compelled to profess complete subservience to Wú. Wǔ Zǐ Xū wanted Fūchāi to complete the destruction

of Yuè, which he regarded as a mortal threat to Wú. Instead of following this advice, however, Fūchāi grew fascinated by the prospect of winning victories elsewhere, and thereby becoming Chief of all the Territorial Lords. He, therefore, over Wǔ Zǐ Xū's vehement objections, attacked Qí, a Chinese State to his north, and won a victory at the Qí city of Āilíng. The following tale begins just as Fūchāi summons Wǔ Zǐ Xū into his presence after winning his victory in Qí. This is Item 5 in "Tales from Wú." ~ Eric Henry.

Upon his return from the Qí campaign, the Wú King had a declaration conveyed to Wú Zǐ Xū that said, "In former times, my predecessor King Hélú exemplified kingly virtue and made his sagely wisdom bright, in such a way that these qualities reached as high as the Supreme Ancestor. Like a farmer tending his fields, he scythed away the tangled weeds, so as to establish his fame in Chǔ—and this was due, sir, to your powerful efforts.¹ Now, sir, you are old, but, not content to take your ease, you instead pass your days thinking of evil schemes. Every time you go out, you accuse the people of crimes,² throwing into disorder established procedures, so as to cast a fatal spell on the State of Wú. Heaven has now shown favor to Wú, and the forces of Qí have tendered submission. I do not at all consider my role in this to have been great; the bells and drums of the former Kings³ have provided supernatural assistance. And so, I presume to announce this to you, sir."

¹ This refers to Wú's invasion of Chǔ and seizure of Chǔ's capital Yǐng in 506.

² This refers to Wú Zǐ Xū's oft-repeated statement that the people of Wú are growing disaffected.

³ These bells and drums were placed at or near the Ancestral Temple of the Ruling House, and were used to announce the commencement of military campaigns; hence they were endowed with the numinous power of Wú's former Rulers.

Unfastening his sword, Wú Zǐ Xū said, “Before this, our former King had officers whose forebears had assisted the Court for generations, and so was able to resolve doubts and foresee misfortunes, and thus was able to avoid falling prey to disaster. But now you have cast aside your aged advisors, and make schemes with a group of youngsters, saying, ‘You are not to violate my orders.’ To violate, let us note, is a violation. But to fail to violate, is also a violation. To fail to violate is a stairway to destruction. Those whom Heaven casts aside, I note, are invariably vouchsafed some small sources of delight and are made to think that great worries are far in the distance. If Your Majesty should cease to pursue your ambitions in Qí, and come fully to your senses, then the State of Wú might still be able to last for generations. What our former Ruler gained, he gained because he met the conditions for those gains; and what he lost, he also lost for equally sufficient reasons. If you use able counselors to the end, you will be able to save the tottering State before it is too late. In the present case, you lack the factors that can lead to gain, but Heaven has granted you repeated successes. This shows that Wú is without prospects for long survival. I⁴ cannot bear to plead illness, retire from Court, and then see Yuè make Your Majesty a captive. I therefore beg permission to die before this happens.”

He, then, killed himself. As he was about to die, he said, “Hang my eyes on the Eastern Gate so that I may see the troops of Yuè’s invade the city and bring about Wú’s ruin.”

⁴ In the Chinese text Wú Zǐ Xū uses his personal name, Yuan 員, to refer to himself. He uses his name, in effect, as a first-person pronoun, a usage that expresses heartfelt and humble sincerity.

Author: Unknown, 4th Century BCE.

65. A Ruler Cornered

This story, no. 6 in “Tales from Wú,” depicts the dire consequences of Fūchāi’s failure to listen to Wǔ Zǐ Xū’s advice. Fūchāi is on his way to an Interstate Assembly where, he is convinced, he will be recognized as the foremost of all the Lords. While on his way, he receives disturbing news from home, which gets worse and worse as he progresses. He perseveres, however, and poses as a mighty victor, while his own State is progressively destroyed. ~ Eric Henry.

Less than a year after killing Wǔ Zǐ Xū, King Fūchāi of Wú raised an Army and went on a northern campaign before the crops had matured.⁵ He made a deep trench connecting Shāng [the State of Sòng] with Lǔ: a canal that went from the Yí River in the north⁶ to the River Jì in the west,⁷ in order to meet with Lord Wǔ, the Ruler of Jìn,⁸ at Huáng Chí.⁹

At this juncture, Gōujiàn of Yuè had Fàn Lí and Shé Yōng lead troops along the seacoast and then up the Huái River, so as to cut off Fūchāi’s’ path of return. They defeated Prince Yǒu of Wú at Gū Xióng Yí. The Yuè King, Gōujiàn, then led his Army of the Center up the Wú River to make a surprise attack on the Wú capital, entering its outer wall, burned the Gūsū Tower, and took away Wú’s great boats.

⁵ Campaigns in early China were usually carried out only in seasons when farmers were idle.

⁶ The Yí was a river in Lǔ.

⁷ The Jì was a river in Sòng.

⁸ Wǔ, the Lord of Jìn, was also known as Lord Dìng (Jìn Dìnggōng, reigned 511–475).

⁹ Huáng Chí: a site south of present-day Fēngqiū 封丘 district in Hénán. The conference at Huáng Chí took place in 482 (Ai-gōng 13).

While Jìn and Wú were still contesting the leadership of the Lords at the Interstate Assembly, a report from the border came, informing Fūchāi of the havoc created by Yuè. Alarmed, the King of Wú assembled his officers and consulted with them, saying, “Yuè is behaving improperly and has broken our peace agreement. The roads ahead of us stretch far—which would be advantageous: to abandon the conference and return, or remain at the conference and yield the leadership to Jìn?”¹⁰

Wángsūn Luò 王孫雒 said, “As this is an emergency, the discussion, it seems, may proceed without regard to age or rank, so I shall presume to speak first. Neither of these alternatives is advantageous. If we abandon the conference and return, Yuè’s fame will grow great, the people will be alarmed and fall away, and will be too far away to respond. Qí, Sòng, Xú, and the Yí tribes will say, ‘Wú has been defeated!’ They will attack us from both sides along the canal. We will have no prospect of survival. If we remain at the conference and yield the leadership to Jìn, then [the Lord of] Jìn, holding the reins of leadership, will be able to lord it over us, and will achieve his aim of having an audience with the Son of Heaven, as the Chief of all the Lords. Then, we will be unable to await his return, but will find it unendurable to go elsewhere. If the glory of Yuè is further magnified, I fear our people will revolt. We must remain at the conference and take the lead.”

The King turned to Wángsūn Luò, came close to him, and asked, “How do you propose we take the lead?”

“Do not fear, Your Majesty,” replied Wángsūn Luò. “The roads ahead of us stretch far—we must not have two conflicting orders, but must quickly make up our minds—only then can the situation be saved.”

¹⁰ i.e. give the Jìn Ruler precedence in smearing the blood of the sacrificial victim on his lips, thus signaling his status as Chief of the Lords.

Wángsūn Luò, then, stepped forward and, bowing to the assembled officers, said, “If one cannot convert danger to safety, nor convert a situation that threatens death to one that allows survival, one’s wisdom cannot be prized. The people’s hatred of death and their desire to enjoy wealth, rank, and long life is the same as our own; nevertheless, they are close to their own territory, and thus have room for maneuver; we are cut off from our territory and thus have no such recourse. Can Jìn have any will to place itself in mortal danger by contesting this matter with us? Serving a Ruler requires courage and strategy. Now is the time to use them. This very night we must challenge Jìn to battle, so as to give heart to our people. I beg Your Majesty to exhort the men-at-arms, so as to swell their spirit and numbers, and encourage them with promises of high position and rich rewards, and prepare instruments of execution to visit disgrace on any who are not persuaded, and, in short, cause everyone involved to look lightly on their own deaths.

“If Jìn declines to fight and yields to us, then we will hold the reins of leadership. As the harvest has not yet been gathered, we will not blame the Lords for failing to offer tribute to us, but will send them home first, which will surely delight them. After they all have returned to their native places, Your Majesty can then make plans in an undisturbed and steady manner, quickly on some days, and more slowly on others, so as to securely achieve your aims. You must confer lands along the Yángzǐ and Huái Rivers upon the people who served you; then you will be able to return to Wú.”

The King accepted this advice.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

66. The Destruction of Wú

This long narrative is the sole story in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 1) which is the twentieth of the twenty-one fascicles in the entire work. It begins with a depiction of the defeat and humiliation of Gōujiàn, the King of Yuè, in 495, when he is decisively defeated by Wú and has to retreat with a remnant of his Army to the top of Mount Kuàijī near his capital. The narrative goes on to describe how Gōu Jiàn gradually restores his State to strength and at last, in 473, succeeds in destroying Wú, twenty-two years after his defeat. ~ Eric Henry.

Gōujiàn, the King of Yuè, perched with his troops on Mount Kuàijī,¹¹ roared out an announcement to his Three Armies:¹² “If there is anyone among my elders, brothers, or members of the royal line¹³ who can assist me in devising a scheme to make Wú withdraw, I will share the government of Yuè with him!”

The Officer Wén Zhǒng stepped forward and replied: “I have heard that merchants purchase furs in the summer, and light fabrics in the winter, boats when drought prevails, and wagons when the earth is flooded, so as to await a time of scarcity. It is the same for a Ruler: Even when, let us note, surrounding States are causing no worries, one cannot neglect the cultivation of policy-spinning officers and fighters who

¹¹ Mount Kuàijī was southeast of the Yuè capital, the site of which was located in and around the modern city of Shàoxīng, Zhèjiāng Province. The verb “perched” (qī 棲) is meant to dramatize the precariousness of the Yuè Army’s situation at this juncture.

¹² Here the term “Three Armies” means nothing more than “assembled troops.”

¹³ The text says “bearers of the State surname” (guózǐ xìng 國子姓). Yuè and Wú kinglists, however, show plainly that the Rulers of those States did not in a strict sense have surnames, though both in a later era laid claim to ancient Chinese surnames, Jī 姬 in the case of Wú, and Sì 姒 in the case of Yuè.

make war with fang and claw. This is like having wide-brimmed bamboo hats and thatched jackets—once rain has come, one seeks these items. In the present case, Your Majesty is already perched for refuge on Mount Kuàijī, and only now want to seek the aid of strategists; are you not late in doing this?”

“If I can still listen to what you say,” said Gōujiàn, “how could it be too late?” He took Wén Zhǒng by the hand and fell into consultation with him.

He, then, sent Wén Zhǒng to Wú to negotiate a peace, and Wén Zhǒng said to the men of Wú, “Having no one else to use, my Ruler Gōujiàn has sent me, Zhǒng, his lowly servant here to discuss matters. I dare not direct my words to the Great King¹⁴ himself, but wish to speak in private to his functionaries as follows: ‘Our Ruler’s troops are not worthy to have caused His Majesty to have suffered the indignity of noticing them; our Ruler wishes to present him with gold, jade, and male and female servants in compensation for this indignity. Gōujiàn begs permission to give his daughters to serve as Consorts for His Majesty, his Officers to give their daughters to serve as Consorts for your Officers, and his Men-at-Arms to give their daughters to serve as Consorts for your Men-at-Arms. The precious vessels of Yuè will all be at your service; and our Ruler will lead all the forces of his State in following the forces of His Majesty’s State, so that he may give them orders as he pleases. If His Majesty feels that the crimes of Yuè are too great to be pardoned, then our Ruler will set fire to his ancestral altars, tie up his wives and children, and cast his gold and jade into the river’s depths. His five thousand remaining armored troops will then fight to the death; and there will surely be a corresponding loss on the side of Wú. Thus, he

¹⁴ In the Chinese original, “great” is “heaven-ordained,” an extremely honorific reference to Fūchāi, the King of Wú.



[Gōujiàn], is proposing to bring ten thousand armored soldiers to serve His Majesty—surely His Majesty [Fūchāi] does not wish to do injury to what lies closest to his heart? Rather than kill all those people, would it not be better to gain [the service of] a State? Which would be most advantageous?”

Fūchāi was about to consent to these peace terms when Wǔ Zǐ Xū admonished him, saying, “This will not do. Wú and Yuè, let us note, are unalterably opposed States of like strength. The Three Rivers surround them, and the people have no means of going elsewhere.¹⁵ If Wú is to exist, then there can be no Yuè; and if Yuè is to exist, then there can be no Wú. There is no way to change this. Your servant¹⁶ has heard that dry land people live on dry land, and that water people live on water. If we should attack and vanquish some State of great status, we would be unable to live in that State’s territory or ride in that State’s chariots. But if we should attack and vanquish Yuè, we would be able both to live in her territory and ride in her boats. This would be a great opportunity and is not to be given up; Your Majesty must destroy that State. If we let this opportunity pass, it will then be too late for regret.”

The men of Yuè outfitted eight beauties with adornments and presented them to Chief Counselor of Wú, Bó Pǐ, saying, “If you pardon Yuè’s offenses, we will present you with women still more beautiful than these.”

The Chief Counselor, then, made a policy speech to King Fūchāi, saying, “I have heard that in former times, the purpose of attacking a

¹⁵ The three rivers were the Wú River 吳江, the Qiántáng River 錢唐江, and the Pǔyáng River 浦陽江. The meaning is that the people of Wú and Yuè had no means of moving beyond the confines of their two States.

¹⁶ Wu Zǐ Xū here uses his given name, Yuán 員, as a first-person pronoun.

State was simply to subdue it. We have now subdued Yuè—what more is there to seek?”

Fúchāi granted peace to Yuè on the terms proposed and dismissed Wén Zhǒng.

Gōujiàn explained his policies to the men around him,¹⁷ saying, “While remaining in stubborn ignorance of our true strength, I, the lonely one, engaged in hostilities with our enemy, thus causing our people’s bones to bleach on the central plain.¹⁸ In acting thus, I was in the wrong. I, now, beg permission to reform my behavior.”

He, then, buried the dead, cared for the living, mourned with those in sorrow, congratulated those who had cause for joy, saw wayfarers off, received those who came from afar, got rid of all that the people hated, and supplied the people with the things that they lacked. He, then, humbly served Wú, taking three hundred eunuchs and men-of-service with him to perform menial services, and in State processions went before Fūchāi, becoming a front-rider for his troops.

Gōujiàn’s territory extended to Gōuwú in the south, to Yù’ér in the north, to Jǐn in the east, and to Gūmiè in the west, amounting in all to a hundred square *lǐ*. He assembled the parents and elders of the State and swore an oath before them, saying, “I have heard that under the enlightened Kings of former times, people from all directions came to their support, like water flowing downward. But in the present case, I am not of such ability; I have merely summoned you all here, married couples and others, to increase the population.” He gave orders that

¹⁷ The text here has “guó rén” 國人, “men of the state capital,” but the capital of Yuè was an uncommonly spread-out one. Ruling the State for Gōujiàn involved constant movement from one place to another. It was not like a Chinese capital city.

¹⁸ This is a set phrase; the battles concerned did not take place on China’s central plain, but rather in the marshy, aquatic terrain of Northern Yuè.

young sturdy men were not to take elderly wives, and that the elderly were not to take young and vigorous wives; and that if there were women of seventeen who had not yet been given in marriage, her parents would be held guilty of an offense, and that if there were young men of twenty without wives, their parents would likewise be held guilty. Those who were about to give birth were to announce the fact, and medical attention would be provided to them. Those who gave birth to healthy males were to be given two pots of wine and a dog, while those who gave birth to healthy females were to be given two pots of wine and a small pig. Those who gave birth to triplets were to be provided with a wet nurse, and those who gave birth to twins were to be given food. Anyone who lost a son by their Principal Consort was to be relieved of government service for three years. Anyone who suffered the death of the son of a Subsidiary Consort was to be relieved of government service for three months and would be required to mourn them at their burials as if he were the heir. He stipulated that the sons of orphans, widows, the sick, and the poor were to be given employment.¹⁹ As for men skilled in some accomplishment, he had their dwellings made clean, beautified their raiment, made their diets ample, and provided them with training in ritual norms. When men of service from other regions came to pay Court to him, he received them with full ritual in the Ancestral Temple. Gōujiàn went about in boats laden with rice paste and fatty meat and, whenever he saw vagrant children roaming about in his State, he invariably had them eat and drink, and never forgot to ask their names. He ate nothing but what he had planted himself and wore nothing but what his Consort had woven herself. He collected no taxes for ten years, and his people all had three years' worth of provisions.

¹⁹ This was perhaps to provide them the means to support their impoverished parents.

The elders of the State laid a request before him, saying, “In former times Fūchāi disgraced Your Majesty before all the Lords, but now the State of Yuè is in good order; we beg to avenge this wrong.”

Gōujiàn declined, saying, “That former war was not the fault of all you gentlemen; it was rather my own fault—why should you all share my shame? I beg to put aside for now the idea of warfare.”

The elders entreated him again, saying, “In every region of our State, the people are as close to Your Majesty as if you were their mother and father. When a son thinks of avenging his father’s shame, or when an officer thinks of avenging his Ruler’s shame, does he dare to do ought but his very best to bring this about? We beg to again do battle.”

Gōujiàn thereupon accepted their request. After assembling his troops, he addressed them, saying, “I have heard that the worthy Rulers of former times did not fear that their forces were insufficient. They feared rather that, in their aims and behavior, his men might lack a sense of shame. Fūchāi now has a hundred and three thousand men wearing armor made of water buffalo hide. He does not fear that, in their aims and behavior, his men might lack a sense of shame; but fears that the numbers under his command are insufficient. I now wish to help Heaven destroy him. I do not want people to flaunt their individual courage; I want our troops to advance and retreat *en masse*; and in advancing to think of rewards, and in retreating, to think of punishment; in this way, an assured reward will be obtained. As for those who advance without orders, or retreat without knowing shame, this will ensure punishment.”

The attack began, and the people of the State all spurred each other on, fathers exhorting sons, elder brothers exhorting younger brothers, and wives exhorting husbands, saying, “Who else is like this Ruler of ours, that you can decline to die for him?”

And so, they defeated Wú at Yòu, defeated them again at Mò, and defeated them yet again at the outskirts of the Wú capital.

Fūchāi sued for peace, saying, “My troops are not worthy to have caused Your Majesty to have suffered the indignity of noticing them; I wish to present you with gold, jade, and male and female servants in compensation for this indignity.”²⁰

In reply, Gōujiàn said, “In former times Heaven delivered Yuè into the hands of Wú, and Wú declined to accept what Heaven had ordained. Now, Heaven has delivered Wú into the hands of Yuè—can Yuè ignore what Heaven has ordained, and instead listen to your commands? I beg leave to establish you in a place east of Yǒng Gōu, and thus, I will treat you as a Secondary King.”

“According to ritual prescription,” Fūchāi replied, “I am slightly senior to you.”²¹ If you still have some regard for the House of Zhōu,²² and grant our House a parcel of land, even if it only be big enough to be contained by the outer walls of my dwelling, that is what I desire. But if you say, ‘I shall level the altars of your State and destroy your Ancestral Temple, then I shall beg leave to die—what face will I have left to exist in the realm?’ You need only lead your troops in, and station them in, the capital.”

Gōujiàn then extinguished Wú.

²⁰ This language, the reader will note, repeats the language that was used by Gōujiàn, through his Emissary, Wén Zhǒng, to make an appeal to Fūchāi at the beginning of this narrative.

²¹ Literally, “senior for the time it takes to eat one bowl of rice.”

²² Fūchāi is here invoking the (imaginary) relationship of Wú to the House of Zhōu.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

67. Waiting For Signs to Appear

Summary: Four years after his return from Wú (486), Gōujiàn summons Fàn Lí and recalls how, when he first came to the throne, he did not concern himself with his subjects, but cared only for hunting and wine, boats, and carriages. Heaven punished him for this with defeat and servitude, from which he and his people suffered much. He asks if he and Fàn Lí can plan a counterattack. Fàn Lí replies that they must wait for Heaven to turn, that is, wait for the right conditions to appear. To attempt to force matters would lead to disaster. Wú, he says, belongs to Gōujiàn, but if he grows overeager, everything will become uncertain. Gōujiàn accepts this advice. This Item 2 in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2).

~ Eric Henry.

In the fourth year [after his return to Yuè], the King summoned Fàn Lí and sought his advice, saying, “When my predecessor²³ came to the end of his days, and I assumed the throne, I was still a youngster and had not yet formed fixed habits. When I went out, I devoted myself to hunting, and when I returned to the palace, I abandoned myself to wine.

“I gave no thought to the ministerial clans; for me, there were only boats and carriages. Heaven on high, therefore, visited disaster upon Yuè so we became a hostage of Wú. Wú’s treatment of me was harsh indeed. I wish to devise a scheme with you. Can this be done?”

“Not yet,” he replied. “I have heard it said that when the Lord on High has not brought something to pass, one must await the turning of the seasons; to force matters is inauspicious. Also, when you gain your

²³ Gōujiàn’s predecessor was his father Yǔncháng 允常, who reigned from mid mid-sixth century to 497. This Ruler’s tomb lies on Mount Yīn 印山 southeast of Shàoxīng, Zhèjiāng Province. Yǔncháng is said to have had a long reign and to have made the State strong, claims that are consistent with the vast dimensions of his tomb.

opportunity, but then fail to complete your enterprise, you will suffer for it later. “You will lose your innate kingly virtue and destroy your reputation; you will have to flee, suffering exile or death. Opportunities are sometimes snatched away by Heaven, sometimes given, and sometimes not given. Do not be too early in making your schemes. Wú, one may say, belongs to Your Highness. But if you are precipitous, then the outcome cannot be known.”

“I accept your words,” said the King.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

68. Signs Appear, But Not Enough

Summary: One year later (485), Gōujiàn summons Fàn Lí and asks if they can now make plans to attack Wú. Fūchāi, he observes, has grown dissolute and reckless, has distanced himself from loyal ministers, and listens only to flattery. Fàn Lí observes that while human affairs in Wú are now ripe, Heaven has not yet responded; therefore, it would be best to wait. Gōujiàn agrees to this. This is Item 3 in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2). ~ Eric Henry.

A year later, the King summoned Fàn Lí and asked for his advice, saying, “When I wished to make plans with you regarding Wú, you said, ‘It is not time yet.’ But now the King of Wú is besotted with pleasure and forgets the affairs of the ministerial clans; he throws the labors of the people into disorder and acts counter to Heaven’s seasons. He places credence in flatterers and delights in actors; he hates those who would guide him and distances his aides. Sages do not appear and loyal ministers are dead and gone; everyone suppresses their true views so as to enjoy favor; no one exerts himself to investigate what is wrong, and all above and below shirk their duties. Can we take action?”

“Human affairs there have reached the point of no return,” was

the reply, “but the response of Heaven has not yet appeared. Bide your time for now, Your Highness.”

“I approve,” said the King.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

69. Omens Appear, but Interactivity is Insufficient

Summary: One year later (483), Gōujiàn summons Fàn Lí yet again, and asks if they can now make plans to attack Wú. Wú, he observes, is suffering from famine brought on by a plague of “paddy crabs.” Fàn Lí answers that Heaven has now given a sign but that human affairs have not yet developed to their conclusion, so it would be best to wait. This exasperates Gōujiàn, who asks Fàn Lí why he keeps putting him off by speaking alternately of heavenly signs and human affairs. Fàn Lí replies that human affairs must be in accord with the workings of Heaven and Earth if Yuè is to succeed. The famine in Wú is still a new phenomenon, and the people and officials of Wú are concerned that their supplies would be insufficient to support them under prolonged attack. They would, therefore, work together and fight fiercely if attacked now. Gōujiàn’s best course for now, he says, would be to indulge in hunting and palace amusements—enough to delude Wú, but not enough to impair Yuè’s readiness. This will induce Fūchāi to grow slack and neglect the well-being of his people. Yuè will then be able to bring the punishment of Heaven upon Wú. This is Item 5 in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2). ~ Eric Henry.

After another year, the King again summoned Fàn Lí for advice and said, “When I discussed making a scheme with regard to Yuè with you, you said, ‘It is not time yet.’ But now their rice-plant crabs have left not a stalk standing, not even the seeds. Can we take action?”

“Heaven’s response has now come for sure,” said Fàn Lí, “but the

affairs of men have not yet reached their culmination. Your Highness had better wait for now.”

The King was angry and said, “Is this really in accord with principle? Or are you deceiving me with irresponsible nonsense? When I spoke to you of the affairs of men, you replied by speaking of the seasons of Heaven. Heaven has now given its response, and you reply by speaking to me of the affairs of men. What is the meaning of this?”

“Don’t take offense at this, Your Highness,” said Fàn Lí. “The affairs of men, please note, must form a triad with the affairs of Heaven and those of Earth; only then can one’s enterprises meet with success. The disaster that has befallen them is still new and the people are afraid. The Ruler together with his great and small officers all know that their supplies are insufficient to withstand a prolonged attack. This means that they will combine their strength and fight to the death; the enterprise is still dangerous.

“Your Highness can go ahead and hunt animals and shoot birds, but not to such an extent that you lose yourself in these activities. You may pursue pleasure within the palace, but not so much that you become lost in dissipation. You may relax and enjoy yourself with your officers so long as you do not forget the constant procedures of the State.

“In this way their leadership will diminish in virtue, and their people will exhaust their strength. This will cause the people to resent their leaders while at the same time suffering a dearth of food. That will be the moment when we can inflict the punishment determined by Heaven and Earth. Let Your Highness bide your time for now.”

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

70. Army Raised, But Not Launched

Summary: Four years later (479), in the ninth month, Gōujiàn summons Fàn Lí and intimates that attacking Wú would be better than doing

nothing, even if it is not yet possible to achieve a total conquest. Fàn Lí replies that he also has been thinking this, and allows Gōujiàn to raise an Army, which they bring to the Wǔhú (Five Lakes) region.

Forces of Wú appear and challenge Yuè to battle, advancing and withdrawing five times in one day. Gōujiàn wishes to accept the challenge, but Fàn Lí warns him that the time has not yet arrived, and he desists.

In a lengthy speech, Fàn Lí adds that military experts of former ages based the movements of their troops on the cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, and did not respond to challenges when the enemy appeared strong and decisive. In the end, this story reveals how the King responded. This Item 6 in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2).~ Eric Henry.

When the dark month²⁴ arrived, the King summoned Fàn Lí to Court for inquiry, and said: “There is a proverb that goes, ‘Waiting for a banquet is not as good as eating a meal of watery gruel.’ The end of the year has arrived. What should we do now?”

“Even if Your Highness had not spoken,” replied Fàn Lí, “I would have asked to do this. I have heard that acting in season is like putting out a fire, or going in pursuit of an escaped man—one’s only fear is that one will not be in time.”

“I approve,” said the King. He, then, raised an Army against Wú, and came to the Five Lakes region.

When the men of Wú heard of this, they came out and challenged the troops of Yuè to battle. They came and went five times in the course of the day. The King could not bear their taunts and wished to accept the challenge.

Fàn Lí remonstrated with the King, saying, “Making a scheme in

²⁴ The “dark” month was a way of referring to the ninth month.

the palace halls and then letting it go awry by doing battle—is this permissible? Don’t take up their challenge for now. Your servant has heard that when an opportunity arrives, one must not be lax in response, for it will not come again. One who fails to take what Heaven grants will suffer disaster instead.

“Advances turn easily into retreats, leading to later regret. The seasons of Heaven do indeed change; only schemes should not be altered.”

“I accept what you say,” said the King. He did not answer Wú’s challenges.

Fàn Lí said, “Your servant has heard that in ancient times those who were skilled in using troops regarded advances and retreats as regular procedures and regulated their strategies according to the four seasons. They did not pass beyond the extremes established by Heaven; they stopped when they exhausted the possibilities allowed them.”²⁵

“The way of Heaven is brilliantly clear, and the sun and the moon are its constant signs. When they are bright, we may take example from them and advance; when they are dim, that is the time to go away. When *yáng* reaches its limit, it gives way to *yīn* and when *yīn* reaches its limit, it gives way to *yáng*. When the sun is exhausted [sinks in the west] it again returns; when the moon is full, it begins to wane.

“Those in ancient times, who were skilled in using troops, based all their movements on the regular rhythms of Heaven and Earth. When acting later, one should use *yīn* methods; when acting first, one should use *yáng* methods.”²⁶ When close to the enemy, one should use soft

²⁵ This means that they did not look for exceptional circumstances to save them.

²⁶ “*Yīn* methods” refers to not initiating action. “*Yáng* methods” refers to use of initiated actions.

maneuvers, so as to entice the enemy into battle; when at a distance, one should use hard maneuvers, so as to keep the enemy from drawing near. When acting later, one must avoid being completely hidden by *yīn* maneuvers, and when acting first, one should avoid being made too conspicuous by *yáng* maneuvers.²⁷

“There are no fixed principles for using men; one must take one’s cues from actual situations. If the men offer stout resistance, and their *yáng* spirit is not exhausted, they will not die on the field. If they come to engage us, we must hold firm without engaging them in battle. If we decide to engage them, we must come down upon them like a disaster inflicted by Heaven and Earth; and we must also observe their degree of hunger or nourishment, exhaustion or ease, and make this a further basis for calculation. We must wait for their *yáng* spirit to be exhausted, and our *yīn* spirit to reach its fullest peak, if we are to snatch victory. When it is the right time to take the aggressive role, one must be forceful and swift. When the *yīn* spirit has not yet passed its peak, one must tread lightly and not expect to seize the upper hand. When it is the right time to take the aggressive role, one must be composed and firm. If the enemy still has the hard spirit, one cannot take them lightly, or the victory will be lost. When it is time to take the initiative, one must act in a calm, serious, and determined way. When the enemy’s *yīn* spirit has not yet passed its fullest phase, one must not try to back them into a corner.

“Whenever one creates battle formations, one should establish a component on the right to fulfill a female [defensive] function, and supplement it with a component on the left to fulfill a male [aggressive] function. Whether early or late, there will then be no loss, for all will assuredly accord with the way of Heaven, and one will never lose one’s

²⁷ This paragraph apparently concerns relative advantages on the battlefield of showing oneself and taking cover.

freedom to maneuver. But the enemy, in their present encounter with us, are acting in a hard, forceful, and swift manner. Your Highness had best bide your time for now.”

“I accept what you say,” said the King, and did not enter into battle.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

71. Dealing with Vanquished Foes: Finish the Job

Summary: After resisting Yuè for three years, Wú’s forces fall apart, and Fūchāi retreats with his closest advisors to his Tower at Gūsū. He sends Wángsūn Luò to Gōujiàn to sue for peace. Wángsūn Luò requests that Gōujiàn agree to peace on the same terms that Fūchāi agreed to when Gōujiàn was surrounded at Mount Kuàijī. Gōujiàn is about to consent out of pity when Fàn Lí dissuades him, saying that if he makes the same mistake that Fūchāi made at Kuàijī, Heaven will assuredly change his triumph to destruction. Gōujiàn accordingly refuses Luò’s request. Luò goes back, and returns and sues for peace again with redoubled ceremony and humility. Gōujiàn is, again, inclined to consent, but Fàn Lí asks him how he can lightly cast aside the labor of ten years. This story highlights how Kings choose war or peace, and it ends with a surprise. This is Item 7 in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2). ~ Eric Henry.

After Gōujiàn had been in the field for three years, the forces of Wú collapsed and the King of Wú went with a few trusted advisors and high-ranking officers to the top of Mount Gūsū.²⁸

The King of Wú had Wángsūn Luò go and sue for peace with Yue, saying, “In days gone by, Heaven on High visited disaster upon Wú when I gave you offense at Kuàijī. Let Your Highness now consider what to do

²⁸ Fūchāi had created a great pleasure pavilion on the summit of this mountain.

with my unworthy self in return. I beg to renew the peaceful relations that were established between our two States at Kuàijī.”

The King of Yuè could not bear to deal harshly with Fūchāi and wished to grant his request. Fàn Lí advanced and said, “Your servant has heard that the merit of sages is that they make routine use of the seasons. When a favorable season arrives and it is not used, Heaven will reverse the situation. The time of reversal is not more than five years distant. If it is a minor calamity, it will be nearer at hand, and if a major one, it will be more distant.

“Our forebears had a proverb that goes, ‘When chopping wood for an axe handle, the model is not far away.’²⁹ But now, you are failing to act with resolve. Have you forgotten what happened at Kuàijī?”

“I accept your words,” said the King. He refused the request of the King of Wú.

The emissary went back, and returned again with words that were yet more humble and gifts that were yet more precious. The King of Yuè, again, wished to grant his request.

Fàn Lí remonstrated with the King, saying, “Who caused us to come early in the morning to hold Court and not return until late in the evening? Was it not Wú? Who contested sovereignty of the Three Rivers and the Five Lakes with us? Was it not Wú? Can it be permissible to scheme ten years to gain a thing, and then cast it all away in a single morning? Let Your Lordship deny the request for now; the matter will, then, be easier to see to the end.”

“I want to deny the request,” said the King, “but I find it difficult to face the emissary. Speak to him yourself, sir.”

Fàn Lí then went and met the emissary, holding a drum with his

²⁹ Cf. *Odes*, Máo 158 “Fā Kē,” “Chopping an Axe-handle,” verse 2.

left hand and a drumstick with his right, and said, “In former days, High Heaven visited disaster upon Yuè and delivered us into the hands of Wú, but Wú did not accept this opportunity. Now Heaven has reversed that event as a recompense for our disaster. How could our King dare to ignore Heaven’s decrees, and listen instead to the decrees of your King?”

Wángsūn Luò said, “Master Fàn, the ancients had a saying that goes, ‘Do not aid Heaven in its persecutions; to aid Heaven’s persecutions is inauspicious.’ In the present case, the rice-plant crabs in Wú have left not a single stalk standing, not even seeds for next year’s planting. Do you not worry that it will be inauspicious for you to aid Heaven’s persecution of us?”

Fàn Lí said, “My good Prince, in days gone by our Rulers could not even enjoy the rank of Viscount in the Zhōu Court, so they were left to dwell in the marshlands of the Eastern Ocean, where alligators, and sea-turtles, fish, and terrapins congregate, sharing the marshy islands with frogs. Though we have human countenances, we are nevertheless mere animals—how can we know anything about these high-flown phrases?”

Wángsūn Luò said, “Master Fàn, you are about to help Heaven to perpetrate calamities. To act thus is inauspicious. I beg leave to explain this to your King.”

Fàn Lí said, “Our King has already entrusted this matter over to me, his deputy. Go; do not make this deputy give you cause for offence.”

The emissary took his leave and returned to Wú to make his report. Without relating to Gōujiàn what had transpired, Fàn Lí struck his drum and raised a force to follow after the emissary. They got all the way to the Gūsū Palace without the people of Yuè sustaining a single injury. They, then, extinguished Wú.

Author: Unknown, 2nd Century BCE.

72. Choosing the Right Moment to Retire

Summary: This story is an illustration of the wisdom of a wise and resourceful officer who is able to see when his usefulness at Court is at an end. In such cases, it is a potentially deadly mistake to fail to retire from service. In a parallel account in *Zuǒ Tradition*, Fàn Lí sends a letter to Wén Zhǒng, a fellow officer in the Yuè Court. His words sum up the expendability of strategists once their goals have been achieved: “When the flying birds are killed, the trusty bow is put away; when the wily hare is dead, the swift hunting dog is boiled; when the enemy State is broken, the strategy-spinning Minister perishes. The King of Yuè has a long neck and a mouth like the beak of a predatory bird. He is a good companion in times of trouble, but not in times of peace. You had better depart from Court.” Wén Zhǒng fails to act on this advice, and is later forced by the King to commit suicide.

This is Item 8, the last in “Tales from Yuè” (Book 2). The narrative appears also, with differences in detail, in *Shǐjì* 41 (Shìjiā 11).

~ Eric Henry.

On his return from Wǔhú, Fàn Lí bade farewell to the King, saying, “May Your Highness carry on with vigor; your servant shall not again enter the State of Yuè.”

“I do not understand what you are saying,” said the King.

“Your servant has heard,” replied Fàn Lí, “that one who acts as another’s officer, exerts himself when his Ruler is afflicted with worries, and dies when his Ruler suffers disgrace. In former days, Your Lordship suffered disgrace at Kuàijī, and for that reason I did not then die; I instead resolved to carry out this mission. Now the domain has been saved, so I beg to submit to the punishment due me for Kuàijī.”

“If anyone fails to cover up your shortcomings and praise your virtue,” said the King, “I shall cause him to come to an evil end in Yuè. If you accept what I say, I shall share the State with you. If you do not accept what I say, you shall die, and your wives and children will be put to the sword.”

“I have heard Your Highness’s decree,” said Fàn Lí. “Let Your Highness act according to the laws; I shall act according to my aspirations.”

He, then, boarded a light boat and floated about on the Five Lakes. No one knows where he finally ended his days.

The King ordered craftsmen to use fine metal to make a statue of Fàn Lí so that homage could be paid to it in Court. He had his officers make obeisance to it once in each ten-day cycle, and set aside a three-hundred-*lǐ* tract of land around Kuàijī to serve as Fàn Lí’s personal fief, saying, “If any of my descendants dare to encroach upon Fàn Lí’s territory, they shall be made to come to an evil end in Yuè. Let the Spirits of Heaven, the Lords of Earth, and the Rulers of the Neighboring Domains be guided by this.”