The Biography of Wu Zixu

Sima Qian (BCE), The Records of the Grand Historian, chapter 66

The Records of the Grand Historian, compiled by Sima Qian c. 100 BCE, is widely acclaimed as the greatest historical work in the Chinese literary heritage. Sima Qian was an official historian at the court of the Han Dynasty, but he wrote this massive work—130 chapters in all—privately, and manuscripts of his work began to circulate only after his death around 86 BCE. Sima’s work contains annalistic chronicles, thematic essays on basic government institutions, and genealogical charts of noble families, but by far the most prominent feature of his work are biographies of important historical figures (or social groups, such as merchants and Confucian scholars) from the earliest recorded history down to his own day. This selection is devoted to Wu Zixu, a statesman who lived in the late sixth century BCE. Born in the state of Chu, Wu Zixu was serving as an envoy to the court of Liang when his father, Wu She, and brother were arrested and put to death by the king of Chu. Wu She’s strident opposition to the king’s decision to take for himself a princess bride sent from the state of Qin to marry his son, the crown prince, had incurred the king’s wrath. Wu Zixu subsequently fled to the state of Wu, arch-rival of Chu, where he was warmly welcomed and appointed a minister of state. Years later, after a Wu army seized the Chu capital, Wu Zixu was able to avenge the deaths of his father and brother. But he also became embroiled in the factional struggles at the Wu court. Ultimately he lost the trust of the Wu king (who had come to power in a coup-d’état in 515 BCE) and was ordered to commit suicide for opposing the king’s plan to attack the powerful state of Qi. Before taking his life, Wu—who had advised the king to deal first with the menace posed by its neighboring rival, Yue—predicted that the king’s unwise attack on Qi will result in the extinction of the Wu state. Sima’s account concludes with the annihilation of Wu by Yue in 473 BCE, fulfilling Wu Zixu’s prophecy.

Wu Zixu was a native of Chu; his personal name was Yun. His father was named Wu She; his elder brother, Wu Shang. One of his forebears, Wu Ju, had won renown for the frankness with which he offered advice when he was in the service of King Zhuang of Chu, and accordingly the family in later generations enjoyed fame in the state of Chu.

King Ping of Chu [r. 528-516 BCE] had a son named Jian whom he had designated as crown prince and for whom he appointed Wu She as Grand Tutor and Fei Wuji as Lesser Tutor. Fei Wuji, however, felt no loyalty to Prince Jian and, when King Ping sent him to the state of Qin to fetch a bride for the prince, he hurried back and reported to King Ping, saying, “The Qin woman is of extraordinary beauty! Your Majesty should take her for yourself and let me go look for someone else to be a bride to the prince.” King Ping in the end took the Qin woman for himself. He treated her with extreme favor and affection and she bore him a son named Zhen. Another bride was found for the prince.¹

Fei Wuji, having used the Qin woman to ingratiate himself with King Ping, then left the service of the prince and entered that of the king. But he feared that, if some morning the king should pass away and the crown prince come to the throne, the latter would kill him, and so he set about slandering the prince. The prince’s mother was a woman of Cai and no longer enjoyed

¹ These events occurred in 527 BCE. At the time the crown prince was fourteen years old.
the favor of the king. The king grew increasingly cold toward the crown prince, dispatching him
to guard the region of Chengfu and see that the troops along the border were kept up to strength.

Before long Fei Wuji was at the king again, day and night warning him of the prince’s
shortcomings. “Because of the business of the woman of Qin,” he said, “it is impossible that the
prince should be without feelings of resentment and anger. I hope Your Majesty will take some
small precautions to protect yourself. Ever since the prince has been residing in Chengfu and has
had command of the troops there, he has been in contact with the lords of other states abroad. It
would almost seem as though he is preparing to enter the capital and start a revolt!”

King Ping thereupon summoned the Grand Tutor Wu She and subjected him to
examination. Wu She, aware that Fei Wuji had been speaking ill of the crown prince to King
Ping, exclaimed, “How can Your Majesty let some petty, slandering villain of a minister estrange
you from your own flesh and blood!”

But Fei Wuji said, “If Your Majesty does not block the prince now, the plot may be
brought off and you will very likely end up a prisoner!” In anger King Ping thereupon had Wu
She thrown into prison and ordered Fen Yang, the marshal of Chengfu, to go and kill the crown
prince. Fen Yang set out, but before arriving he sent a man ahead to inform the crown prince,
urging him to leave immediately. “If not, you will be put to death!” he warned. Prince Jian fled
and took refuge in the state of Song.

Fei Wuji said to King Ping, “Wu She has two sons, both worthy men. If you do not put
them to death, they are likely to cause trouble for the state of Chu. It would be best to use
the father as a hostage and summon them to court. If not, they will be a worry to Chu!” The king
sent a messenger to Wu She to inform him, “If you can make your two sons come to court, you
may live; if not, you die.”

Wu She said, “My son Shang is a man of goodness. If I call him, he is sure to come. But
Zixu is a man of fierce determination, willing to bear disgrace and capable of accomplishing
great things. When he sees that, if he comes, he will only be taken prisoner along with his
brother, he will be bound under the circumstances not to come!”

The king, heedless of his words, sent a messenger to summon the two sons, saying, “If
you come, I will spare your father. If you do not come, I will kill him this instant!”

Wu Shang wanted to go, but Zixu said, “The ruler of Chu is not summoning the two of us
because he wants to spare our father’s life. He is already afraid that, if we get away, we will
make trouble later on and so he is using our father as a hostage and is summoning us under false
pretenses. If both of us go, then father and sons will all end up dead. How will this make our
father’s death any less terrible? Our going will only ensure that the injustice of it will never be
avenged! It would be better to flee to some other state, enlist outside help, and in that way wipe
out our father’s disgrace. If we are all destroyed, nothing can be done!”

Wu Shang said, “I know that even if I go I can never hope to save my father’s life. It is
just that I would hate to think that he called me to save his life and I failed to obey. Later, if I
should be unable to wipe out the disgrace, I would end up as the laughing stock of the world and
nothing more!” Then he said to Wu Zixu, “You must go away, for you are capable of avenging
the wrong of our father’s murder. I will go to the death that awaits me.”

Wu Shang accordingly gave himself up to arrest but, when the envoys tried to seize Wu
Zixu as well, he drew his bow, snatched an arrow, and stood facing them so that they did not
dare advance. Eventually he was able to escape and, hearing that Prince Jian was in Song, went
there to become his follower.
When Wu She heard that his son Zixu had escaped, he said, “It will not be long before the ruler and subjects of the state of Chu taste the bitterness of war!” When Wu Shang arrived at the Chu court, the ruler put both him and his father Wu She to death.2

Wu Zixu had reached the state of Song when the revolt of the Hua lineage broke out there, and he and Prince Jian [the disgraced crown prince of Chu] accordingly fled together to Zheng, where the people of Zheng treated them very well. The prince also journeyed to Jin, where Lord Qing of Jin said to him, “You are already on good terms with Zheng and the men of Zheng trust you. If you were willing to work on my behalf from inside the state of Zheng, while I attack from the outside, we could be certain of wiping it out, and with Zheng wiped out, I could grant you a domain to rule!” The prince accordingly returned to Zheng. The time had not yet come to carry out the plot, however, when it happened that, for private reasons, the prince decided to put to death one of his followers. The man knew of the plot and informed the men of Zheng of it, whereupon Lord Ding of Zheng and his prime minister Zichan put Crown Prince Jian to death as punishment.

Prince Jian had a son named Sheng. Wu Zixu, alarmed by what had happened, joined Sheng and together they fled to the state of Wu. When they reached the Zhao Pass, the keeper of the pass wanted to arrest them but Wu Zixu, separating from Sheng and fleeing on foot alone, just managed to escape, his pursuers following close behind. When he reached the Yangzi River, he found a solitary fisherman in a boat who, recognizing that he was in a desperate situation, ferried him across. When they had reached the other shore, Wu Zixu unfastened his sword and said, “This sword is worth a hundred pieces of gold. I will make you a present of it.” But the fisherman said, “According to the command of the state of Chu, anyone who captures Wu Zixu will receive fifty thousand piculs of grain and be honored with the title of Holder of the Jade Baton! If I had reward in mind, why would I settle for a mere hundred-gold-piece sword?” He refused to accept the gift.

Before Wu Zixu reached the state of Wu, he fell sick and had to stop along the road to beg for food.

When he arrived in Wu, the kingdom was under the rule of King Liao [r. 526-515 BCE], with Prince Guang commanding the army. Through the good offices of Prince Guang, Wu Zixu was able to gain an interview with the king. Sometime later, the women of Zhongli, a town on the Chu border that specialized in raising silkworms, and those of Beiliang, a town on the Wu border with a like occupation, quarreled over their mulberry trees and the two towns attacked one another.3 King Ping of Chu was enraged, and it reached the point where both states called out their armies to prepare for battle. Wu dispatched Prince Guang to attack Chu, and he captured Zhongli and Juchao before returning. Wu Zixu advised King Liao of Wu, saying, “Chu is ripe for conquest! I beg you to send Prince Guang into the field once more.” But Prince Guang said to the king, “This Wu Zixu’s father and elder brother were both put to death by Chu. He encourages Your Majesty to attack Chu only because he wishes to avenge their deaths. An attack on Chu is not at all certain to end in victory!” Wu Zixu realized that Prince Guang had ambitions within the state—that he hoped to kill the king and set himself up as ruler—and that it was useless to talk to him about campaigns.

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2 The executions of Wu She and Wu Shang and the flight of Wu Zixu to Song (and then Zheng) occurred in 522 BCE.

3 Mulberry leaves were used to feed silkworms.
abroad. He therefore recommended Zhuan Zhu to Prince Guang, while he himself, along with Sheng, the son of Crown Prince Jian, retired to a life of farming in the countryside.

Five years later, King Ping died. Earlier, the woman of Qin whom King Ping had taken away from the crown prince had given birth to a son named Zhen. When King Ping died, Zhen was eventually set up as his successor and is known as King Zhao [r. 515-489 BCE]. King Liao of Wu took advantage of the funeral in Chu to dispatch two princes to lead troops in a surprise attack against Chu. Chu called out its own troops to cut off the Wu army from the rear and prevent it from returning. With the state of Wu now empty of troops, Prince Guang ordered Zhuan Zhu to surprise and assassinate King Liao, after which he took the throne himself. He is known as King Helü [r. 514-496 BCE].

King Helü, having realized his ambitions and gained the throne, summoned Wu Zixu and made him his foreign envoy, consulting with him in matters of state policy. Chu meanwhile put to death its high ministers Xi Yuan and Bo Zhouli. Bo Zhouli’s grandson Bo Pi escaped and fled to Wu, where in time he was granted high station. The two princes whom King Liao had sent to lead the troops in an attack on Chu first found their avenue of return cut off, and then received word that Helü had murdered his sovereign, King Liao, and set himself up in his place. In the end they surrendered, along with their troops to the king of Chu, who awarded them domains in the region of Shu.

In the third year of his reign, Helü called out his forces and, with Wu Zixu and Bo Pi, attacked Chu, seizing the region of Shu and eventually taking prisoner the two Wu generals who had earlier gone over to the enemy. King Helü wished to push on to Ying, the Chu capital, but General Sun Wu said, “The people are exhausted. The time has not yet come—let us wait a bit.” Accordingly, they returned.

In the fourth year, Wu attacked Chu and seized the regions of Liu and Qian. In the fifth year, it attacked the state of Yue and inflicted a defeat. In the sixth year, King Zhao of Chu sent Prince Nangwa to lead the troops in an attack on Wu. Wu dispatched Wu Zixu to meet and repulse the attack. He inflicted a major defeat on the Chu army at Yuzhang and seized Juchao from Chu.

In the ninth year [506 BCE], King Helü of Wu said to Wu Zixu and Sun Wu, “Earlier you told me that it was too soon to try to march on Ying. What do you say to that idea now?”

The two men replied, “The Chu general Nangwa is greedy and the states of Tang and Cai are both enraged at him. If Your Majesty is determined to launch a major attack, you must secure the help of Tang and Cai. Then there will be some hope of success.”

Helü followed their advice and, calling out all his troops, joined Tang and Cai in an attack on Chu, the attackers drawing up on one side of the Han River, the Chu forces on the other. The king of Wu’s younger brother, Fugai, led his troops and asked to be allowed to join in, but the king would not hear of it. In the end, he took the five thousand men under his command and made an attack on the Chu general Nangwa, who fled in defeat to the state of Zheng. The Wu armies, pressing their advantage, moved forward and, after five battles, reached the capital city of Ying. On the jinmao day, King Zhao of Chu fled from the capital; the following day, the king of Wu entered it.

When King Zhao left the capital, he sought refuge in the Yunmeng Marshes but, being attacked by bandits there, he hurried on to the region of Yun. Huai, the younger brother of the lord of Yun, said, “King Ping murdered our father, so it will surely be all right if we murder his

4 Sun Wu reputedly was the author of the famous treatise on military strategy and tactics, Master Sun’s Art of War.
son, will it not?” The lord of Yun, fearful that his younger brother would in fact kill the king, fled with the king to Sui. The Wu troops surrounded Sui and said to its inhabitants, “All the states along the Han River that belonged to the heirs of the Zhou have been wiped out by Chu!” The men of Sui wanted to kill King Zhao, but Prince Qi, a member of the Chu royal family, concealed the king and prepared to pass himself off in his place, whatever might ensue. The men of Sui divined to see if they should hand the king over to Wu but, receiving an unfavorable answer, they conveyed their apologies to Wu and declined to hand over the king.

Earlier, Wu Zixu had been friendly with one Shen Baoxu. When Wu Zixu fled from the state of Chu, he said to Shen Baoxu, “I am determined to destroy Chu!” “And I am determined to preserve it!” replied Shen. Later, when the Wu forces entered Ying, Wu Zixu searched for King Zhao. Failing to find him, he proceeded to dig up the grave of King Ping of Chu, exposed the corpse, and inflicted three hundred lashes upon it. Only then would he let the matter rest. Shen Baoxu, who had escaped the mountains, sent word to Wu Zixu, “How harshly you avenge the wrongs of the past! I have heard that men, if their numbers are sufficient, may win out against Heaven, but that Heaven, once it has determined to do so, is likewise capable of destroying men. You were once a minister to King Ping, facing north in the manner of a subject and serving him in person. Yet now you go so far as to inflict punishment upon a dead man! Do you suppose there is no limit to what Heaven will countenance?”

Wu Zixu replied, “My apologies to Shen Baoxu. Tell him that the day draws to a close and my journey is a long one. Therefore I stumble on as best I can and resort to any crooked means to gain my end.”

With this, Shen Baoxu hastened to the state of Qin to spread news of Chu’s peril and beg help from Qin. Qin refused to grant his petition, but Shen Baoxu stood lamenting in the Qin court for seven days and seven nights, never once ceasing his cries, until Lord Ai of Qin took pity on him. “Though Chu may be unprincipled,” he said, “if it has ministers like this one, how can it help but survive!” Then he dispatched five hundred war chariots to assist Chu in attacking the Wu forces. In the sixth month they inflicted a defeat on the Wu armies at Ji.

Meantime, while King Helü continued to remain abroad in Chu to search for King Zhao, his younger brother, Fugai, returned to Wu in secret and set himself up as king. When King Helü received word of this, he abandoned Chu and went home to attack his brother. Fugai fled in defeat and in time made his way to Chu. King Zhao of Chu, seeing that Wu was torn by internal strife, returned to his capital at Ying. He invested Fugai as lord of Tangqi. Chu fought once more with the Wu forces, inflicting a defeat, whereupon the King Helü returned to his capital.

Two years later King Helü sent his son, Crown Prince Fucha, to lead the forces and attack Chu, where he seized control of Pan. Chu, fearful that Wu would invade in large numbers again, abandoned Ying and moved its capital to Ruo.

At this time Wu, employing strategies suggested by Wu Zixu and Sun Wu, crushed the powerful state of Chu in the west, filled Qi and Jin to the north with awe, and in the south forced the people of Yue to submit. Four years later Confucius became prime minister of Lu.

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5 Sui, like Tang, Cai, and Wu itself, had been founded by descendants of the Zhou royal house. Here the Wu general alludes to Chu’s origin as a non-Zhou, “barbarian” state.

6 Wu Zixu is saying that he is afraid that he may die before he can carry out vengeance against the living Chu king, Zhao, and therefore has resorted to this symbolic act.

7 The claim that Confucius briefly served as prime minister of Lu in the year 500 BCE undoubtedly is apocryphal.
Four years after this, Wu attacked Yue. King Goujian of Yue came out to meet the attack, inflicted a defeat on the Wu army at Gusu (Suzhou), and wounded King Helü in the finger. The army was driven back and Helü, ill from his wound, lay on the point of death. He said to Crown Prince Fucha, “Will you forget that Guojian killed your father?” to which Fucha replied, “I would not dare to forget!” That evening King Helü died. Fucha, succeeding him as king of Wu, appointed Bo Pi to be his chief minister and drilled his troops in archery.

Two years later he attacked Yue and inflicted a defeat at Fujiao. King Goujian of Yue took his remaining soldiers, five thousand men, and encamped with them on top of Guiji. He sent his high officer Zhong with generous gifts to give to Wu’s chief minister, Bo Pi, and beg for peace, offering to surrender sovereignty of his state and declare his vassalage to Wu. The king of Wu was on the point of accepting the offer when Wu Zixu advised against it, saying, “The king of Yue is the kind of man who is willing to endure great shame and hardship. If you do not destroy him now, you will be sure to regret it later.” The king of Wu, however, ignored this advice and instead followed the recommendation of his chief minister Bo Pi and made peace with Yue.

Five years later, word came to the king of Wu that Duke Jing of Qi had died and that his chief ministers were vying with one another to win favor with the new ruler, who was still a boy. The king of Wu thereupon called out his armies and prepared to march north and attack Qi. Wu Zixu admonished him, saying, “Goujian eats the plainest food, consoles the families of the dead, and inquires after the ailing—it would seem that he has some task in store for his people. As long as this man continues to live, he will always be a threat to Wu! Yue is to Wu like a sickness in the belly or the heart of a man! Yet now Your Majesty does not first dispose of Yue, but concentrates on Qi instead—is this not a mistake?”

The king of Wu would not listen but attacked Qi and inflicted a major defeat on the Qi army at Ailing. Then, having overawed the ruler of the neighboring states of Zou and Lu with his might, he returned, and from this time on grew increasingly deaf to Wu Zixu’s suggestions on policy.

Four years later, the king of Wu prepared to march north and attack Qi again. King Goujian of Yue, adopting a scheme recommended by Zigong, led out his forces and went to assist Wu, meanwhile sending lavish gifts to the Wu chief minister Bo Pi. Bo Pi had already received bribers from Yue a number of times in the past and, favoring and trusting Yue implicitly, he day and night spoke on its behalf to the king of Wu, who in turn trusted Bo Pi and followed his suggestions. Wu Zixu warned him, saying, “Yue is a sickness in the heart and belly! Now you put faith in its groundless words, its deceit and hypocrisies, and are greedy to acquire Qi. But even if you should conquer Qi, it would be to you like a stony field, something wholly without use. Moreover, does not the ‘Announcement of Pangeng’ [chapter of the Book of Documents] say, ‘If there are men who are perverse, insubordinate, and lacking in respect, I will cut off their noses, kill them, and wipe them out! I will not let their young ones live, I will not let them shift their seed to this new city!’ It was in this way that the Shang rose to glory. I beg Your Majesty to leave Qi alone and first dispose of Yue. If not, you will regret it later, and then it will be too late.”

The chief minister Bo Pi, having earlier had a falling out with Wu Zixu, took this opportunity to slander him, saying “Wu Zixu is the kind of man who is stubborn and violent, showing little mercy to others, full of suspicion and malice. His hatred and resentment will, I fear, bring on some terrible disaster. Earlier, when Your Majesty wished to attack Qi, he insisted that it would not do, yet you carried out the attack and won great success. Ashamed that his
advice and counsel were not heeded, he reacted with hatred instead of joy. Now you plan once more to attack Qi, and Wu Zixu bends every effort to speak out against it, trying to upset and destroy the whole undertaking, only hoping that Wu will somehow be defeated so that his own advice will be vindicated. Your Majesty is preparing to go in person, leading every man in the kingdom who is capable of bearing arms, to carry out the attack on Qi. But Wu Zixu, since his admonitions are not heeded, will find some way to drop out, sending his apologies, feigning illness, and not joining in. Your Majesty must not fail to take precautions—disaster might easily arise from such a situation! What is more, I have sent men to spy on him and they report that, when he went as envoy to Qi, he entrusted his son to the Bao family of Qi. Now when a minister is unable to get what he wants within the state, he often looks for help from the various princes abroad. He regarded himself as chief consultant to the former king and now when his advice is no longer heeded, he is in a constant fret of anger and resentment. I beg Your Majesty to deal with him as soon as possible!”

“Even if you had not spoken, I was beginning to grow suspicious of him!” said the king of Wu. He then dispatched a messenger to present Wu Zixu with the sword named Shulü, saying, “You shall die with this.”

Wu Zixu looked up to heaven and sighed, “Ah, it is that slanderous minister Bo Pi who is making trouble, and the king instead condemns me to death! I made your father a leader among the various princes, and before you had been designated heir, when the other princes were struggling to gain the throne, I risked my life battling for you with the former king, and even then you almost did not succeed in winning the throne. And once you had become ruler, you wanted to divide the state of Wu and give me part of it but, far from accepting, I said that it was more than I had any right to hope for. Yet, now you heed the words of a sycophant and because of them inflict death upon a worthy man!”

Then he said to his retainers, “You must plant catalpa trees on my grave mound—the wood will come in handy for making coffins. Pluck out my eyes and hang them over the eastern gate of the capital, so I may watch when the Yue invaders come out to wipe out the state of Wu!” Then he cut his throat and died.

When the king of Wu heard of his dying words, he was filled with anger and proceeded to take Wu Zixu’s corpse, stuff it into a leather wine sack, and set it adrift in the Yangzi River. The people of Wu, filled with pity, set up a shrine to Wu Zixu on the river bank, and thus the place came to be called the Hill of Xu.

After the king of Wu had put Wu Zixu to death, he carried out his attack on Qi. The Bao clan of Qi murdered their sovereign, Lord Tao, and set up Yang Sheng in his place. The king of Wu intended to punish the usurper but, failing to gain victory, he withdrew. Two years later the king of Wu summoned the rulers of Lu and Wey to a meeting with him at Taogao. The following year he went a step farther by proceeding north and calling a great meeting of the other princely rulers at Yellow Lake, claiming that he was defending the authority of the royal house of Zhou. Meanwhile, King Goujian of Yue made a surprise attack on Wu, killing the Wu crown prince and defeating the Wu armies. The king of Wu, hearing of this, returned home and sent envoys with generous gifts to buy peace with Yue.

Nine years later King Goujian finally destroyed Wu and killed King Fucha. He also put to death the chief minister Bo Pi because he had been disloyal to his sovereign, accepting lavish bribes from abroad and allying himself with the king of Yue.
The Grand Historian remarks: How terrible a thing is the poison of hatred in men! If a ruler must not arouse hatred among his ministers and subjects, how much more important that he not do so among his equals. If Wu Zixu had joined his father She and died with him, he would have been of no more significance than a mere ant. But he set aside a small righteousness in order to wipe out a great shame, and his name has been handed down to later ages. How moving! At that time Wu Zixu suffered hardship by the riverside and begged for his food along the road, but in his determination he did not for a moment forget what happened in Ying. He bore all secretly and silently, and in the end achieved merit and fame. Who but a man of burning intention could have accomplished such a deed!