The Wu Zixu Transformation Tale

This story is a fictional account about an actual historical figure, Wu Zixu 伍子婿, who lived in the sixth-fifth centuries BCE. Wu’s story is recorded in many early histories, including the Records of the Grand Historian, but this popular narrative was written much later, probably around 720 CE. The actual text dates from the 9th-10th centuries. It was found, in fragments, among a large cache of documents discovered earlier this century at Dunhuang, an oasis town in northwestern China that in medieval times had been an important military outpost along the Silk Road. The text is incomplete; in several places there are missing sections, and the final section is lost as well. From other accounts, however, we have a basic understanding of the missing portions. “Transformation tales” (bianwen 變文) from Dunhuang represent the earliest narratives written in vernacular Chinese. In contrast to formal historical accounts that reflected the concerns of the Confucian-educated elite, narratives such as the “transformation tales” were intended to be read by (or recited aloud to) the general public. Since it was written long after Wu Zixu’s own time, the narrative does contain anachronistic discrepancies, for example references to Buddhist ideas such as karma and reincarnation common in the Tang dynasty but as yet unknown to Chinese in Wu Zixu’s day. Although such narratives were intended to entertain their audiences, they—like formal historical writings—also conveyed moral lessons (but not exactly the same messages as works of history).

Of old, when the Zhou dynasty was on its last legs, the Six Powers began to contest among themselves and the eight barbarians vied with each other in invading the realm.

In the south, there was King Ping of the kingdom of Chu who, reposing in benevolence, exercised a civilizing influence over his people. There were attendant upon the king’s court ten thousand principalities. His charismatic sway spread afar, enabling him to exercise a commanding influence over the sundry states. For external affairs, he sponsored a deliberative body called the “Bright Terrace” and, for internal matters, he ascended the palace throne. He pacified the area to the south as far as the Gate of Heaven; his northernmost frontier pass was at Huaihai; his frontiers to the east went as far as the sun and moon; to the west, his borders were the Buddhist kingdoms. He opened up mountains and rivers to correct the earth’s axis and adjusted the twelve musical half-tones so as to differentiate yin and yang. When he mounted the throne, it brought stability to the Imperial Gate; when he shook the Yellow Dragon standard, his assistants came to him. The six dragons sent down from heaven good fortune; the symbols of earth betokened auspicious harvests. Neither did the wind make the branches of trees rustle nor did the rain break up the clods of earth. The avenues, boulevards, streets and roads, neatly and impressively laid out, were broad and level. Indeed, he had made a name of himself that would last ten thousand generations.

The prime minister of Chu was surnamed Wu, with the personal name She. Possessed of literary and military ability, he was dedicated to preserving the altars of Chu. He held a three-foot long sword in his hand and entrusted his emotions to his six-foot frame. Ten thousand nations willingly received his commands. He was honest and straightforward in conduct, and faithful and true to ceremonial usages and rules. His opinions were as lofty as the wind and the clouds; his heart was as firm as iron and steel. Of constant purpose and unfailing assiduity, he was attentive both morning and night. Wu She served his ruler with dedication as his ideal.
Through obedience, he enabled his ruler to be successful. But, if even the monarch were tyrannous, Wu She would rebuke him without regard to his superior status.

Now, Wu She had two sons who were in the service of their lord. The younger was called Zixu and the elder Zishang. The one was serving in the kingdom of Liang and the other in the state of Zheng. Both were loyal and far-seeing men.

The crown prince of Chu was a grown man but had not yet taken a wife. The king inquired of his officials, “Who has a daughter worthy of being the prince’s consort? We have heard that, ‘if a country be without an heir apparent, half of the land will be barren. Though the flowing springs of the Eastern Sea flood a tree with their plentiful waters, if the tree has no branches, half of it will be dead.’ The crown prince represents half of the majesty of the kingdom, but he has not yet taken a wife. What do you think?”

The grand minister Wei Ling addressed the king, saying “I have heard that Lord Mu of Qin has a daughter sixteen years of age who is surpassingly beautiful. Her eyebrows are like the waning moon, her cheeks like concentrated light, her eyes like shooting stars, and her face as colorful as a flower. Her hair is seven feet long, her nose is straight and her forehead square, her ears like pendant pearls. Her hands hang below her knees, her ten fingers are slender and long. I would hope that Your Majesty issue directives whereby marriage arrangements be made on behalf of the prince. If things can be worked out to satisfy Your Majesty’s wishes, it would be a splendid event in whose glory all nations could share.”

So the king sent Wei Ling to seek the hand of the Lord of Qin’s daughter. After Wei Ling had returned with the girl, the king summoned him and said, “I have troubled you to make this long journey and to brave wind and frost.”

When the King Ping saw how beautiful and charming the girl was, he suddenly became filled with a wolfish, tigerish desire. Wei Ling craftily played upon the king’s feelings. “I would have Your Majesty take her for your own imperial concubine. We can seek elsewhere for the crown prince. There are beautiful girls without number. How could this be an offense against ideals?” When the king heard Wei Ling’s words, he was happy beyond measure. He forthwith took the girl from Qin as his concubine. For three days he stayed in the inner palace and did not hold court.

Wu She was furious when he heard this, and not cowering before the thunder and lightning of the king’s majesty, he went straight before the palace. Risking the royal displeasure, he straightforwardly reproved the king. King Ping was startled and apprehensive. “Has there been an unfavorable omen?” he asked.

“Today I have seen you act so unscrupulously,” answered Wu She, “that I fear for the ruin of the kingdom. If the country should undergo a rebellion and its ministers abandon it, would that not all be attributable to the Lord of Qin’s daughter? You gave her to your son as a bride but then took her yourself as a concubine. Will not contending like this with your son for a wife bring you opprobrium before Heaven and Earth? This has made chaos of our laws and overturned the rules of propriety and good custom. I must reprove you, for I fear that it is going to be difficult to preserve your country’s altars!”

At this, the king’s face went pale with shame. Humiliated in the presence of his ministers, he shot back, “Has the prime minister not heard this saying: ‘Set plans are not to be disputed; spilled water is hard to recover.’ Things being what they are, do not reprove me again!”

Wu She felt that the king, without principle, had taken the Qin girl as his own concubine. Not cowering before the thunder and lightning of the king’s majesty, he risked the royal
displeasure by straightforwardly reproving: “Your Majesty is the lord of ten thousand men and commander of sundry states. How could you have received so credulously the words of Wei Ling?” …

A large gap in the text occurs here. Based on the Records of the Grand Historian, we would expect that King Ping reacts angrily to Wu She’s criticism and imprisons him. Reminded by Wei Ling of the danger posed by Wu She’s two sons, King Ping orders that forged letters be sent to Wu Zishang and Wu Zixu in which their father tells them that if they return to Chu he will be set free. The text resumes with Wu Zishang, who is in the kingdom of Zheng, reading the letter he wrongly thinks was written by his father.

… “If your heart of filial piety can indeed swiftly relieve my distress, this soul of mine, suspended above the netherworld, can avoid having to depart from this mortal world.” When Zishang, far afield, received this summons in his father’s letter, he wept grievously and, intending to beg the king of Zheng to save his father, he went to see him. “My father has been imprisoned by King Ping,” he said. “In a letter from afar, I have been ordered to return. I do wish to save my father, but there is really nothing I can do. I hope that you will think of some plan for me.” “Now,” said the King of Zheng. “Your father has been severely punished and is being detained in a large prison. A messenger from afar has brought this letter, which says that his crimes may be remitted. If you do not save your father from the consequences of his error, how can you be called a filial son? You must depart at once! There is no point in considering the matter further.”

Zishang then bid farewell to the King of Zheng and made a rapid journey through the night to the kingdom of Liang to see his younger brother, Zixu. After telling him in detail the content of the letter, Zishang said, “Now King Ping has acted without principle. He has received credulously the words of a deceitful minister and imprisoned our father. It being his purpose to be ruthless, I have come this long way to call upon you to go with me. The exigencies of the situation do not permit us to tarry for any length of time. I would hope that you pack your things at once.”

Hearing these words of his brother, Zixu realized, even though he was far from Chu, that his father was being held captive. From close consideration of the details of the matter, he concluded that the letter was, in all probability, a forgery. So he answered his brother: “King Ping, being without principle and believing the words of a treacherous minister, has imprisoned our father and intends to execute him. Inasmuch as we two brothers are abroad, he is tormented by the possibility of revenge later on and so has had this letter written, pretending it is father’s. Because we are so far away, he rashly thinks that he can deceive us. Given these circumstances, it is sufficiently clear that, if we go to Chu to save our father, then we too will certainly be slaughtered. This express letter and the command it lays upon us are surely but a monstrous pretext intended to bring us brothers back. And when we get to Chu, we will certainly be implicated along with our father. We cannot embark upon this journey. If we do, we shall be like dull-witted birds thrashing about in a net or fish from a fountain swimming in a kettle.” …

Another gap occurs at this point. In this missing text the two brothers agree that Wu Zishang will return to Chu and his death as a demonstration of his filial piety, while Wu Zixu remains alive to carry out vengeance against King Ping. When Zixu
fails to appear, King Ping sends a messenger to coax him to return. Zixu instead succeeds in capturing the messenger. What follows must be the conclusion of Zixu’s instructions to the messenger.

… “Go back now,” continued Wu Zixu, “and relate everything that I have said. As for my roughness toward you just now, please do not take offense at it.”

When the messenger heard these words he returned at once to Chu and, tying himself up with rope, went to see King Ping. He informed the king, saying:

I received your order to act as express messenger;
Day and night I ran, passing through many lands,
South of Guiji Mountain I caught up with him,
But, pulling out his sword, he thought to behead me.
Your servant cowered before the sword in Zixu’s hand,
Zixu feared that both of us would end up dead.
Each distrusting the other, neither approached,
Word by word across the distance, he explained his case.
“Turn back and report these words of mine to your King Ping:
‘I shall forthwith raise troops and take vengeance for my father!’”

Upon hearing this, the King of Chu struck the steps leading to his throne and shouted angrily, “What an insolent and vile person! How comes it that we endure his existence? ‘How is an inch-long blade of grass fit for measuring Heaven? Can one thin strand of hair hope to withstand the hot coals of a stove?’ Zixu’s words are sheer madness and not even worth our notice. They are but wild verbiage thrown upon the wind! There is no necessity for us to pay them any heed.”

The King of Chu then called Wu She and Zishang out of jail and had them sentenced and punished. When Zishang was about to die, he looked up to Heaven and, sighing, said, “When we were in Liang, I did not follow my brother’s advice and so have come all this way only to die with my father. What can I do now? Alas! Nothing! Beyond this, what more know I to say? After I die, may my brother live on and, if a way be opened by Heaven, may he avenge our father by slaying Chu!” No sooner had he completed these his dying words than they killed him. Father and son were slaughtered at the same instant.

The King of Chu issued a proclamation. Zixu was to be treated in accordance with the terms of the proclamation which read: “In the case of the rebel Zixu, a servant of the Kingdom of Liang. His father was in service to Your Ruler but, unable to remain loyal and circumspect, he plotted against the altars of our state with cruel rapacity. Zishang, a servant of the Kingdom of Zheng, was executed together with his father at the same time. There only remains Zixu who has fled and, as of this moment, has not been apprehended. Whoever can capture him and turn him in will be given a reward of a thousand catties of gold and awarded a domain with the income from a thousand households. Whoever gives him shelter will face the usual punishment provided by law, to wit, first the offender will himself be beheaded and this will be followed by the extermination of his entire clan. Should any arresting officer exercise leniency he will be relieved of his office and brought to prosecution. Your King should be kept constantly informed and the offender escorted, in fetters, to the capital.”

The proclamation having been put in circulation, a watertight dragnet went into effect. Each province and district was informed and public notices were posted on the highways and
roads. Thorough searches were made in every village and ward so that no one dared to shelter Wu Zixu. Rather, greedy for the rich reward, they vied with one another in their pursuit of him.

Zixu walked until he came to some wild mountains where, placing his hand on his sword and sighing, he sang this sorrowful song:

*Full of anger, a long, drawn-out sigh escapes me:
How lamentable for a brave man to be wronged and in peril!
The net of Heaven is all-embracing, the road is cut off,
Leaving me afraid and with nowhere to take refuge.
Thirsty, tired, and without food to fill my stomach,
Companionless I wander in this unending wilderness.
Afar, I hear the mighty wind-swept waves of the river-barrier:
The soaring mountains reach to the very heavens.
No boat there is amidst the desolate islets of this remote place;
How then shall I get to the southern shore?
If it should happen that Heaven on high goes against human feeling,
I’ll not escape having difficulties in this place.*

His sad song finished, Zixu resumed his forward progress. Trusting his karma and in accordance with conditioning causes,¹ he reached the River Ying. The wind came to brush against his ears, bringing with it the sound of silk being beaten. Wu Zixu was hesitant to press forward and so stood in hiding.

*Zixu has come to the side of the River Ying;
Thirsty, tired, and starving, it is difficult to go forward.
Afar, I hear the sounds of the beating of silk in the air,
Cringing and crouching, I come suddenly to a standstill.
I am afraid there may be someone hidden here—
Stealthily, I draw myself into the shade of the trees,
Long and sober reflection tells me I need not be afraid.
Ever so stealthily, I peep through the trees,
Beside the river-ford there are no men—
I see only a nimble, shapely girl beating silk.
A hundred times, she lowers her head and peers into the water;
A thousand passes, her jade wrists dance over the waves.
At once I want to rush forward and beg food of her;
But my heart is full of doubt and irresolution.
Daring neither to advance nor retreat, I quickly reconsider;
Though hesitant, I wish to go away meekly at once.*

The girl who was beating silk in the water suddenly raised her head and saw a man rushing wildly, his spirits crazed, and with a starved look on his face. Because he was wearing a sword at his waist and running, she knew that it was Wu Zixu. Full of sympathy, she said to

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¹ “Conditioning causes” is a technical Buddhist term for the actions taken in this lifetime that determine one’s karmic fate in the next lifetime.
herself: “I have heard that, ‘for a single meal given him in the mulberry grove, Ling Zhe propped up the chariot.’ ‘The Yellow Sparrow which was given a salve to heal its wounds requited the donor with a gift of white jade bracelets.’ Though I have kept myself chaste, pure, and undefiled, it is fortune which has granted me this meeting with a gentleman here by the waterside as I beat my silk. True, our home is not well-provided, but why should I begrudge him this one meal?”

She walked slowly up the bank and called out, “Traveler, won’t you stop awhile? Where do you come from, my good swordsman? Of what kingdom are you the champion? You have a spirited appearance and a lofty manner. What urgent business have you to be hurrying on this long journey, companionless, glancing about in fear, and distraught in spirit? Judging from the look on your face, your heart must harbor something for which you are seeking. If you are not a knight-errant who cherishes a grievance, then it must be that you are being pursued by King Ping. My home, though poor, is hospitable and I make bold to offer you a meal. How would you like that? I hope you will condescend to bend your path this way.”

“I am a man of Chu,” replied Wu Zixu, “and hold the position of envoy to the kingdom of Yue. Recently, because I was appointed to present tribute from Yue, I journeyed westwards to the king of Chu. On my way back, I met together and planned defense matters with the two kingdoms of Liang and Zheng. Riding in a chariot drawn by stout horses, I had gone as far as a small river when I was attacked by fierce thieves, but was fortunate enough to come out of it alive. Today, climbing mountains and crossing ridges, I have exhausted my provisions. Having heard in the air the sound of your silk-beating, I looked everywhere for its source. Appearing thus, I must present a rather sorry figure. And I am afraid I shall be unable to return within the time set by the king. So I am indeed in a great hurry. Now how can I get through to the road which leads to Guiji? I beg of you only the right direction; I dare not expect any food.”

“I have heard a saying of the ancients,” said the girl, “which wasn’t spoken vainly: ‘When one’s affection is gone, there’s no keeping him from his purpose; but a broken bowstring can still be rejoined.’ It is obvious which way your course leads. Yet seeing you glance behind and look ahead, your anxious face stained by the wind and dust of far-off rivers and mountains which you have had to cross, I am so bold as to hope that you’ll not reject my humble offer of a meal.

“From the beginning I have always lived in the Nanyang District
Aged sixteen, the glow of my face is like soft, bright silk
As I beat the silk, my red rouge reflects in deep pools,
The lotus flower floating on the water is no match for my beauty.
My guest has come like a boat floating over the sea;
At dusk, the birds return to roost, fearing the close of day,
Should you not reject this humble offering,
I pray you, try your best to make a meal of it.”

Zixu had wanted to continue on his journey at once but, again and again, she earnestly begged him to stay. It being truly difficult to disregard human kindness, he squatted down right there by the waterside and began to eat. He stopped short after three mouthfuls, thanked the woman, and wanted to set forth at once. Again he was persuaded by the maiden to eat his fill. Now more deeply indebted than ever, he began to tell her of his cares. He answered thusly:

2 The capital of Yue.
I am none other than Wu Zixu;
Escaping from Chu, I flee to Wu in the south.
Because I fear pursuit and capture by King Ping,
I travel at night over desolate roads.
Your gracious gift of a meal is more than enough to fill my hunger;
How will I ever be able to repay you?
My body has regained lightness and strength, my eyes brightness,
And so, taking leave of you, I wish to set out on my long road.
An exile cast out of his native place,
I am this very moment harried by King Ping,
Be so kind as not to let others know I have been here.
I pray you understand my feelings.

When Zixu had finished speaking, he went forward on his way. The girl cried out bitterly and wept aloud:

Wanderer so mournful, I truly worry for you,
Crawling in the face of death yet craving life.
You’ve had a meal from me but that seems not to be enough;
A woman cannot satisfy a hero’s heart.
Although you solemnly rejected my offer,
The embarrassment which you have caused me is not light either.

She paused to restrain her sobbing and wipe her tears:

Your countenance has suddenly become haggard with care,
If, later on, you are taken by those who pursue you,
You will certainly say, ‘It was that woman who brought on my troubles.’
‘Thirty years old, never before having talked to a man,’
I live together with my mother in our neighborhood.
The graceful, charming glow of the face you see before you,
The faith and chastity of a virtuous woman—all cast away in vain!

“My lord Wu,” she called out, “do not doubt me!” Then, clasping a stone, she threw herself into the river and died.

Zixu turned round and looked from afar:
Having a fond regard for the maiden, he was filled with sorrow.
Far off, seeing her clasp the heavy stone and leap to her death in the river,
Involuntarily, he cried out against this injustice.
As the waters of the Ying relentlessly swallowed up her last traces,
Wu Zixu wept and, his grief doubled, sighed sadly:
“If in the future, I should rise to high rank,
I will certainly give a hundred pieces of gold for her tomb.”
When Zixu finished weeping, he resumed his forward progress. The wind and dust seared his face; swirling dust darkened the sky. His nerves strained to the breaking point, Wu Zixu suddenly reached a deep river. Its waters were so deep they seemed to have no bottom and its banks were so far apart it seemed to be endless. He climbed hills and entered valleys, following winding mountain streams to their sources. When dragons and snakes blocked his way, he would draw his sword and rush forward. When his path was full of tigers and wolves, he would draw his bow at once. When hungry, he dined on wild grasses amid the reeds; thirsty, he supped from flowing springs beneath towering cliffs. A hero incensed and out for vengeance regards death as but a sleep.

Suddenly, he came upon a house which stood in a valley. He quickly knocked at the door and begged for food. There was a woman who came to answer the door. Having recognized from afar the sound of her brother’s voice, she knew even at a distance that it was Zixu. With concerned words and affection, she comforted him and asked what trouble he was in. Zixu, his lips sealed, spoke not a word. Realizing that her brother had been thirsty and in want for a long time, she took a gourd which she filled with rice and fixed a salad of bitter-tasting endive and chicory to go with it. Zixu was wise enough to apprehend what it was his sister had in mind. Thinking carefully, he explained to himself, “The gourd filled with rice stands for sweetness within and bitterness without; using chicory and endive for a salad is to match bitterness with bitterness. Taken together, she must mean to send me off at once. I’m to go away at once and cannot tarry longer.”

And so he said goodbye and was about to leave when his sister asked, “Now that you are setting out again, where do you intend to take recourse?”

“To the kingdom of Yue,” answered Zixu. “Our brother and father have been murdered and I must avenge them.” The sister embraced her brother’s head and, not daring to cry aloud, choked and sobbed until she was hoarse. “Alas!” she sighed as she threw herself on the ground and struck her breasts. “How pitiful! What sins we must have committed in former lives to have been thus orphaned and aggrieved!”

“Over the vast reaches of time, what sins have we wrought
That we should now be so ungrateful to our parents?
Although we, in our persons, may be wealthy and honored,
Father in the south and son in the north, we are scattered.
Suddenly, I recall our father and elder brother when they were alive,
And it causes every inch of my vitals to rend.
Today, my younger brother is going away, I know not where,
Leaving me here to bear my grief alone.
Now more than ever I am bereft of a place to devote my love;
Oh, would that I could bring an end to my existence!”

Zixu took leave of his sister, saying:

“Take good care of yourself,
There’s no need to weep and streak your face with tears.
Our father and elder brother have been unjustly slaughtered;
In my heart, a raging fire burns with intensity,
Today there is no place for a man of spirit beneath the sun!”
The brave man’s heart is knotted with deep and bitter resentment.
If the day should come that Heaven opens a way to me,
I swear I will catch King Ping of Chu alive—
Wrench out his heart, chop him to bits,
Wipe out his clan to the ninth degree.
If I do not accomplish all of this,
I swear I’ll not return to my native place!”

As soon as he had finished with these words, he set out toward the south. He had walked a little more than twenty furlongs when his eyes began to twitch and his ears to tingle, so he immediately drew a diagram on the ground to make a divination and he saw by it that his sister’s sons were chasing after him. He sprinkled water on his head, inserted a piece of bamboo beneath his waistband, and put his wooden shoes on backward. He drew the diagrams for “Earth’s Door” and “Heaven’s Gate” and then lay down in the rushes where he chanted the following incantation:

“A plague upon him who catches me,
Death to him who pursues me,
Swiftly, swiftly, as the law ordains.”

Zixu had two nephews, Zi’an and Ziyong. When they returned home, they saw where someone had been eating and knew that it must have been their uncle Zixu. Disregarding the deep sympathy which their mother held for him, with ill intent they at once set out in hot pursuit, thinking all the while, “If we gain audience with the King of Chu and receive a reward, we’ll certainly be able to achieve high rank. The rebel has come to our door just today. There shouldn’t be any trouble catching him.”

When they had walked about ten furlongs, they rested by the side of the road. Ziyong had a slight understanding of the arts of yin and yang and so drew a diagram on the ground and made a divination. It revealed that their uncle had water on his head, which certainly meant that he had fallen by the side of the river; there was a piece of bamboo at this waist which meant that his grave was in a wild place; he wore his wooden shoes backwards, which meant that, wandering aimlessly, he was not making any forward progress.

In accordance with these signs, they felt that he must have died and so did not resume their search. “There’s no more in it for us,” they sighed, “let’s go back home.”

Zixu crouched down to look at his magic markings and saw that his nephews had broken off their pursuit. And so he ran on and on through the starry night without stopping.

In a valley, once more he came upon a house. Its walls were extraordinarily stately. As the farm stood off by itself quite alone, there was no one anywhere around it. Not ashamed of being such a big, husky fellow, he knocked at the gate and begged for food.
Instead, with all proper civilities, she greeted her husband,
Her tearful voice choked with grief, she asked him politely:
“I dwell here in these wild and desolate confines,
Neighborless on all four sides, alone I have settled.
From whence have you come, my good man, to this place,
Your face filled with sadness and a look of hunger?
Reduced to nervous trembling you seem frightened of someone;
You cringe and withdraw timidly while begging for food.
Although I have kept myself secluded in the fastness of my rooms,
You give me the vague impression of being familiar.”

Zixu replied to his wife, saying:

“I am a man of Chu, sent to fulfill a distant mission,
Crossing hill after hill and dale after dale, I was returning home.
On the way I became lost and, as though in a stupor,
Wandered about until I unwittingly came to this place.
My native borders are far away at the western end of the sea,
Distant they are and separated by three great rivers.
Just now, I impulsively and rudely barged in on you;
It was really too rash of me, so I turn myself away.
Milady is very forgetful and so has mistaken me;
Nor do I recall having ever met you, good lady, before.
Now I should like to set forth toward the east of the river,
And hope that you will be so kind as to point the way!”

His wife then composed a poem with the names of medicines its theme and, by means of it,
asked him a series of questions:

“I, Belladonna, am the wife of a man named Wahoo,
Who early became a mandrake in Liang.
Before our matrimonyvine could be consomméted, he had to go back,
Leaving me, his wife, to dwell here ruefully alone.
The mustard has not been cut, the flaxseed bed remains unvisited—
Hemlocked in here without any neighbors, I raised my head and sighed for my Traveler’s Joy:
‘Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme—
I pray that he’ll forget-me-not!’
Gingerly, I hoped, but I recently heard that the King of Chu
Acting without principle and unleashing a bitterroot heart,
Slaughtered my pawpaw and brother-in-law with a jalap! jalap!
Clovered with shame, weak as a wisp of straw.

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3 The medicine poems exchanged by Wu Zixu and his wife are written in an elaborate code of puns, absolutely untranslatable in regular English. The translator has tried to convey the flavor of the original rather than attempting a literal translation.
And arrowhead-swift, my husband fled with fear as a dog would.  
Quick as a periwinkle, he became a fungative,  
And hid among the stinkbushes;  
But hiding became a hell-of-a-bore.  
He seemed like a jackal pursued by horehounds;  
Laudanum almighty, how he hopped and hyssopped like a jack-in-the-pulpit!  
When I think of it, bittersweet tears stain my bleedingheart;  
I am arti-choked with antimony.  
At nightshade when I sleep, it’s hard to endure till the morning’s glory;  
I recite his name all day until my tongue curls up like a sliver of cypress.  
His voice, begging balm, so ingenuous entered my ears,  
Drawn by aniseedent causes, I dilled up to the visitor,  
And, seeing it was my long orrised honeysuckle whom I mint at the gate,  
Sloed down my steps to a hibisicus pace.  
And then I saw your toothwort smile;  
It reminded me of my husband’s dog’s tooth violets.  
Borax you don’t remember me but, no madder what caper you’re up to,  
I’m willing to lay out my scurvy Butter and Eggs.”

Zixu answered in the same cryptic vein:

“Potash! Nitre am I this fellow Wahoo of whom you speak,  
Nor am I a fungative from injustice.  
Listen while I tell you the currant of my travels.  
I was born in Castoria and grew up in Betony Wood;  
My father was a Scorpio, my mother a true Lily-of-the-valley.  
Gathering up all of my goldenrod and silverweed,  
This son of theirs became a Robin-Run-Around.  
Rose Hips was my low-class companion,  
Nelson Rockyfeldspar my upper-crust chum.  
Together with them, I waded Wild Ginger Creek,  
And caught cold in its squilling, wintergreen waters;  
Saffronly, of the three of us, I found myself alone.  
Day after day, my lotus-thread hopes dangled tenuously;  
My thoughts were willows waving in the wind.  
All alone, I climbed Witch Hazel Mountain,  
How hard it was to cross the slippery elms and stone roots!  
Cliffs towering above me, I clambered over stoneworts and rockweeds,  
Often did I encounter wolfsbanes and tiger thistles.  
Sometimes I would be thinking of soft spring beauties,  
But suddenly would meet up with a bunch of pigsheads;  
My thoughts would linger over mid-summer vetches,  
Yet I could never see an end to my tormentils.

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4 “Antecedent causes,” like the term “conditioning causes” mentioned earlier, is a Buddhist term referring to actions determining one’s karmic fate.
So I reversed my steps, feeling compelled to spurry back;
Fennelly, I arrived here.
I grow goatsbeard,
Not dog’s tooth violets.
Methinks you’ve scratched a fenugreek but found no tartar,
So furze tell me what you mean and don’t make such a rhubarb.”

The wife then replied, “Do not be in such a hurry, for your road is a long and distant one.

“And even supposing we have never before met,
What harm is there in my mistaken identification?
I am a daughter of the wealthy Gongsun family:
Fittingly matched with a gentleman, I served him faithfully.
My husband, surnamed Wu, held a high position in government,
As a young man, he traveled a thousand leagues to serve his lord the King.
From the time he left, he sent no letter, not even a word;
Thinking of him, my heart grows so sad that I nearly expire.
The way is long and dark—I feel so isolated and forlorn,
I am not used to being separated for such a long time.
My once rosy cheeks have lost their former hue—how haggard and wan they are.
Fondly I recall him, but the tears, oh when have they ever stopped?
So many years thrown away in vain, keeping watch in these empty rooms,
Who could survive again the beauty and fragrance of Spring?
Day and night, the damsel in her tower feels charm’s glow fading;
And it’s all because her wandering man is serving in Liang.
Languidly, she goes to the front of the courtyard to gaze at the moon;
Then, full of sorrow, returns to her bed to embrace the marriage pillows.
Even a message by carrier pigeon would still not get through;
The frontiers on the horizon are separated by a long, long road.
She tries to weave at her broken loom but feels too disheartened;
Her painted brows are ashamed to face the dresser mirror.
She dotes on the chattering magpies in the grape arbor,
And cherishes the pair of swallows which roost in the white jade hall.
You, in not recognizing me, are behaving like Qiu Hu;
And I, unwillingly, play the role of his neglected wife.
Seeing in your mouth that set of beautiful teeth,
I feel quite certain that I know from this who you are.
Never would I grudge you a meal, coarse fare though it be;
I hope that you will stop here a moment—be not so hurried!”

Having been recognized, Zixu declined her offer. With deceitful, wily words, he evaded her thusly:

“Don’t, my lady, recklessly interfere in my affairs.
There are many men who resemble each other.
Your husband’s surname is Wu and he occupies high office,
I come from a poor family and dwell on the grassy plains.
If I should happen to meet your husband, I’ll pass on the word,
And, with reason, will exhort him to return to his home.
Now, because I have urgent business, I must go east of the river,
I cannot tarry here with you another day or night.”

His wife realized he was planning some important undertaking, and so did not dare further disturb him. According to custom, she gave him provisions and saw him off, as was proper.

Zixu, having been recognized by his wife, said no more. “I am a man,” he thought, “but before I had reached my goal, was recognized by this woman. Yet can I allow such a small matter to defeat me in the performance of this great duty of mine?” And so, hero that he was, Wu Zixu carried a stone as he walked and, with it, knocked out his teeth.

By day, he was guided by the sun and at night by the stars. He ran on without stopping until he came to the north bank of the River Wu. Afraid that there might be someone concealed there, he slunk stealthily among the reeds. Hand resting on his sword, he sighed as he sang this sad song:

“Vast are the river’s waters—its waves rise up and up,
To the sky they boil—or sink lower and lower.
The flying sand is so dense that it covers up the Milky Way;
The chill wind whips up the waves and howls destructively through the forest.
White grasses cover the vast expanse of wild fields and plains;
Green willows stand in lines droopingly on both sides of the river.
Crows and magpies intermingle as they peck about for food;
Fishes and dragons hump here and leap there in grand disarray.
Otters sport in the water and hold playful contests of speed,
A thousand times over, I involuntarily sigh;
Suddenly recalling the unjust slaughter of my father and brother,
I at once feel a burning pain in my heart and bowels.
Thinking of my sworn hatred, I gasp with pain and sorrow,
Though we meet today, I would make no renunciation.
My life may well end in the deep waters of this river;
Whether I live or die depends on what happens tonight.
I do not shirk the thought that my bones may sink in these waves,
The oath of vengeance for my father and brother must never be broken.
There is always the wind by which the firmament bends the grasses,
And, still yet, the mighty transforming power of all the deities.”

When this sad song was ended, he walked to the edge of the river and gazed into the distance. All he could see was the broad expanse of its waters; how could he ever get across? He stretched his neck out from amidst the reeds and, turning his head from side to side, saw that all was silent. His eye met no one out sailing in a boat nor was there anyone on a raft. All he could see were river crows starting out from the banks and egrets contesting in flight, fishes and turtles crisscrossing the surface, cormorants and wild swans gliding about in profusion. He saw, too, long islands here and there on the vast breadth of the river, waves spreading across its coves, dark mists rising, black clouds descending. Trees pressed close upon the worn banks, the moon
shone upon a solitary peak. Dragons trembled and turtles were startled; globe-fish stirred up ripples.

If one had strayed from his native place, he climbs a high mountain and thinks of home; a traveler on a raft guides himself by Orion and Lucifer. Wu Zixu spent one night on Mín Mountain, seeming as a tiger or wolf prowling around. The river rushed by, sounding like drums beating and horns blaring, but there was not a single boat in which to cross it. He had passed two further nights there hiding amidst the reeds when, at last, he saw someone on the waves, singing a ballad as he plied his oars. In his hand, he held a reel and hook and was evidently a fisherman. Wu Zixu emerged from the reeds and called out to him: “You there in the boat, sir, holding the fishing hook! May I trouble you for a moment to come to the bank so that I may have a word with you? Please do not turn from this trouble. I would be most grateful if you would be so kind as to pay me some heed.”

The fisherman, hearing him call, right away tried to find where the voice was coming from. Suddenly, a man appeared out of the reeds and so he at once rowed his boat to the shore. He reeled in his line and—no longer paddling or poling—let the boat drift along on the current. As he rocked to and fro, the fisherman sang “Soothing Breezes,” using the song to ask a series of questions:

“Where is it you wish to go today, my good man?
On the distant shores and inlets of this river,
I see no other travelers in boats,
Nor do you have any companions, so lonely you are.
Perhaps you are like drifting tumbleweed,
Stranded there alone on these desolate islets and shores?
If you’re hunting for a boat or ferry,
You won’t find any at all at this place.
But if you’re not put off by my rudeness,
I request that you tell me fully what’s on your mind.”

“I have heard,” answered Wu Zixu, “that ‘men may know each other through virtue and learning just as fish look toward each other in the rivers and lakes.’ Your humble servant is a traveler. Dare I vainly think up words of deception? Because of a small matter which must be attended to promptly, I need to make my way south of the river. As a person, I am rather inept but I do hope, sire, that I will have the good fortune to receive your understanding. If you will be so kind as to ferry me across the river, my gratitude would be so great that I would even give my life to you. If you cannot agree to this, I will naturally give up the idea altogether.”

“Just now,” said the fisherman, “as I scrutinized your face and examined your appearance, I observed that you were different from the ordinary sort of person. I can tell what is on your mind; you need not clarify yourself further. I have heard that ‘he who can distinguish between good and bad men is himself not base, and he who can distinguish between good and bad jade shall not be wanting’; ‘Duke Mu of Qin prompted gratitude with his gift of wine’; ‘the one who was eloquent gained sole command of the three armies’; ‘he who presented an empty cage received a munificent reward.’ These four sayings all refer to the ability to judge an individual’s true worth. I see that you have been distressed for many days and that you have been thirsty and in want for a long time. You cannot cross the river on an empty
stomach. Allow me to fix a meal for you. The trip from here to my house and back is a little over ten furlongs. It may take me a while to return, so please don’t be suspicious.”

“All that I seek,” said Wu Zixu, “is a boat to ferry me across the river. I wouldn’t dare expect any food!”

“I have heard,” replied the fisherman, “that ‘the unicorn, when it gets food, can travel a thousand miles in a day’; ‘the phoenix, when it is fed, can soar across the four seas.’” He had scarcely finished these words when he beached his boat and set out toward his house to get some food. Zixu had heard what the fisherman said and so watched the boat for him. But he reflected to himself, “This man told me that he was going home to get some food but I wonder whether he might well not have gone to call someone to arrest me.” So he abandoned the boat, went over to the reeds, and hid among them.

In no time at all, the fisherman returned to where he had left the boat. He brought with him a jug of fine wine, five catties of fish, ten thin pancakes, and a container of rice. When he got to where the boat was, the gentleman of the reeds was nowhere to be seen. There was only the empty boat which had been drawn up on the shore. The affectionate regard in which he held Wu Zixu caused the fisherman to feel deep disappointment at this, and so he called with a song:

Oh, gentleman of the reeds!
Why have you gone into hiding?
Come out here so I can have a look at you,
After all, I don’t have any bad intentions.
There’s no need to doubt or worry,
Don’t make things doubly difficult.
I have brought back a meal expressly for you,
Why don’t you come over here and eat it?

When Wu Zixu heard the boatman speak these words, he knew that he was not ill-intentioned and so came out from the reeds. He was embarrassed by the trouble he had put the man to in going to get the food, so he went forward to meet him and offered his humble apologies. Thereupon, they spread out the meal and the two of them ate together. The fisherman then struck up the oars at once and rowed out to as far as the middle of the river. Zixu, having had his fill, thought to himself, “Whoever receives one meal from another is indebted to him to that extent; whoever receives two meals from another must exert himself on his behalf.” So he presented the jade disc which he carried in his bosom to the boatman. The latter, worried that dusk was coming on and anxious to go forward, would not accept the gift. Zixu was worried that the fisherman may have considered this token of his gratitude too trifling, and so took off his precious sword and offered it too as recompense.

The fisherman stopped rowing and, turning around, answered him: “Don’t be so rash! You really ought to think it over carefully. How could the small favor of a single meal be worth so much? Men in trouble, though they be as different as fish are from turtles, flock together; when the going is rough, people as different as dragons are from snakes willingly cohabit. The king of Chu is out to get you and the one who succeeds in capturing you will be rewarded with a thousand pieces of gold. Anyone who harbors you will be executed and his family annihilated. In the first place, I am not greedy for the heavy reward the Sovereign is offering. And, in the second place, I do not run from the possibility of being sentenced and executed. You wish to present your precious sword to me, but how could even it be a match for what King Ping has to
offer? Keep your precious Excalibur to protect yourself, and your jade disk from Jing which will
serve to fulfill what you hold dear. Later on, if you should rise to high place and attain wealth,
do not forget that we once met. I rebuke myself for having grown old so early and for having
met you so late. As for the matter of the sword and jade disc, please do not try again to leave
them with me. If you wish to vindicate my sentiments, it will not be necessary for me to refuse
your offer again.”

When Wu Zixu saw that the man would not accept his gifts, he began to feel increasingly
uncomfortable. “I am afraid,” he thought to himself, “that the boatman belittles these tokens of
my gratitude because they are too poor and too few. And that, even though they are precious
things worthy of a lord or king! What more can I do?” Then he threw the sword into the river. It
shot forth a spirit-like glow, sparkling brightly as it thrice sank and thrice came to the surface
with a great gush and then hovered above the water. The god of the river far off heard the
sword’s roar and, tremulously, he roiled the waters in a great and frothing frenzy. The fish and
turtles were thrown into a panic and burrowed into the mud. Dragons raced along the waves and
leaped out of the water. The river god held up the sword in his hand and, frightened, told Wu
Zixu to take it back.

After the sword had left the water, the fish and turtles began to skitter about again. All
was as bright and pure as the rays of the sun and moon; the mountains and forests glistened. The
clouds parted, and the river fog lifted; mists scattered, and the vapors rolled back. The trees
along the bank seemed to have lined up to welcome a visitor, the river wind to be seeing off a
guest. One could see, far off, egrets standing beside sand bars in the fading evening light, and
making ready to return to their nests in the forest. Along the river banks there were no boats for
hire to be seen. Out on the water, there were no companions for our two passengers. All that
was visible was a solititary mountain across a vast expanse of water.

Wu Zixu turned back to gaze at this homeland and, wiping away the tears which
dampened his shirt, felt deeply disturbed at heart. They had crossed the better part of the river
and were about to reach the south bank so Wu Zixu inquired of the boatman: “What is your
surname and name? In what province and district is your native village?”

“I have neither surname nor name,” answered the fisherman, “and have long lived here
with the river my only companion. I pole across the quiet shore and tie up my boat in deep
pools. Today, two outlaws meet—what need is there to speak of names? You, sir, are the
Gentleman of the Reeds and I the Man in the Boat—that is all we need know about each other.
When you become wealthy and honored, you must not forget me.”

“There will never be a time when I shall forget this aid which I have received from you,”
said Wu Zixu. “Even a wounded snake which is treated with medicine can repay its
benefactor.”

“When you continue your flight today,” asked the fisherman, “in which kingdom do you
intend to seek refuge?”

“I intend to seek refuge in the kingdom of Yue,” replied Wu Zixu.

“So you’re going to Yue,” the fisherman said, “The kingdoms of Yue and Chu get along
well with each other and have never been engaged in military conflict. I am afraid that if you go
there, they will arrest you and extradite you to Chu so the vengeance which you hold in your
heart would never be achieved. But if you take refuge in the kingdom of Wu, the sailing would
certainly be much smoother. The king of Wu has constantly been at odds with Chu. The two
kingdoms do not get along well together. Wu has had numerous campaigns against the kingdom
of Chu and, furthermore, has no able ministers. Obtaining your services would be extremely valuable to them.”

“How can I get the kingdom of Wu to accept my allegiance?” Wu Zixu asked the boatman.

“When you get to the kingdom of Wu,” said the boatman, “enter the marketplace of the capital, daub your face with mud, and make your hair disheveled like that of a wild man. Then go running swiftly, now to the east and now to the west, and cry loudly three times.”

“Please be so kind,” said Wu Zixu, “as to explain all this.”

“Daubing mud on your face,” said the boatman, “means that, though you are defiled without, you are pure within. Crying loudly three times and running swiftly east and west means that you seek an enlightened ruler. Standing in the marketplace with you hair disheveled then makes sense, does it not? Though not a sage, I have had a lot of experience.”

Zixu received his instructions and bowed gratefully to the fisherman. Fearing that he might meet up with the Chu envoys, he could not remain there any longer but set out as soon as they reached the shore. After they parted, he sobbed until he was hoarse. It was like the “four fledglings each flying their own way” or “the three thorns being separated.” Thus he left the fisherman and went toward the south. But, because of his tender regard for the fisherman, Wu Zixu’s grief was unceasing. As he turned his head to look back across the distance, he suddenly saw the fisherman overturn his boat and die. Conscience-stricken by this final favor of the fisherman, Wu Zixu sobbed and wept mournfully without cease and then sang this sad lament:

The great river’s waters, oh, they stretch on and on without end;
The clouds and waters, oh, they seem to join together.
How painful! How very painful! ‘Tis difficult to endure.
How bitter! How very bitter! Injustice upon injustice!
From of old, leave-taking has been a part of human existence;
Life, death, wealth and honor all depend on Heaven.
What have I done to make my teacher hold such resentment against me,
That he should capsize his boat in the middle of the river?
His boat bobs up and down and then sinks beneath the waves;
I sing of the wrong he suffers—how keen and deep the pain is!
It is as though my sad heart was being sliced in pieces by a sword:
As I go on my way, I cannot suppress the tears which stain my collar.
I look toward Wu but, alas, I cannot reach there;
I think of my native kingdom and my heart is filled with grief.
But if I meet a wise ruler, garnering rank and success,
I will display to the full this hero’s heart of mine.

His sad song finished, Wu Zixu once again resumed his forward journey, all the while sick at heart. Now that our hero was isolated, how greatly did he falter! He had served his ruler faithfully and truly for nine years. He had been lax neither in the morning nor at night. In paying his morning respects, he was never remiss. Now that he had encountered such ill-luck, he knew of no words further to express his feelings. The anger in his heart which speech could not convey welled up in his throat. Such was his karma, such his fate—and both depended on Heaven.
Wu Zixu climbed mountains and sprang over ridges, crossed rivers and followed streams. He sought to go forward, but often his way was blocked. And going back, of course, was out of the question. Hungered by his exertions, he felt his life in a whirl. “King Ping,” he cried out, aggrieved, “you are too cruel!”

His sword in hand, Wu Zixu walked on and on until he came to some wild and desolate mountains. There, the rock walls shot ten thousand feet into the sky. A tangled mass of bamboos and creepers penetrated into the earth. Far off, he saw dodder hanging from the pines on the mountains with their dark, steep cliffs. Wolves and tigers came and went, and hundreds of birds filled the air with chirping. Thinking of his native land, Wu Zixu sang this song:

What weighs on my mind is how long, oh, how long the road is;  
Crossing rivers and lakes, I shall enter the domain of Wu.  
My father and brother among the shades in the netherworld, I know not where;  
Alone, and plagued by anxiety, I have been chased away.  
A wandering hero am I who follows his karmic fate;  
Life and death, riches and honor—all of these are inconstant.  
King Ping perversely accepted the words of Wei Ling,  
Trusted a slanderous flatterer, struck down the honest and true.  
Thoughts of my homeland, oh, bring grief which is hard to forestall;  
Facing rivers or climbing mountains, my passions are without let.  
The ruler of Chu has a penchant for buxom grace and narrow waists;  
Inside his palaces, many beauties are starving to death.  
The daughter of Lord Mu of Qin had a face like jade;  
Sweet sixteen is she—her face glows soft as a peach, bright as a plum.  
When he beheld her beauty, he took her in as his concubine,  
Is this any way for a prince and ruler of men to behave?  
Since fleeing, I have felt constant sorrow in my heart,  
I have been left alone and without any recourse.  
To travel by day would be like seeking a way to ghosthood,  
So I step in shadows or hide: but I range the whole night long.  
When shall my deeds be inscribed in stone on Mount Yan?  
Until then, my temples greying, I forge through dust and brambles.  
I fear not east nor west, nor to resist the great cold—  
Only thirst, fatigue, and the passage of wild places.  
Would that I could safely attain the goal which lies ahead,  
May my path be not impeded but flow freely as a brook.  
If, in the kingdom of Wu, I meet a wise ruler,  
I shall raise an army and, posthaste, behead Wei Ling.

His sad song finished and his heart filled with heroic passion, he turned his back on the Chu passes to the north and began climbing south toward Guiji Mountain in Wu. It so happened that he came upon a day when the sky was dark, full of clouds, black as pitch. He strayed from the road and went running back and forth trying to find it, but the mountain forests compelled him to halt. Flocks of strange birds milled about, wolf packs and band of tigers prowled everywhere. The birds cried raucously and the beasts roared angrily. Suddenly, the fear in his heart clearly evident, he pulled out his sword and went forward.
From out of its sheath, light springs forth;
Filling the wild with a spirit-glow.
It holds within the moon and sun,
The Dipper and its seven stars.
The hero’s heart burns with sorrow,
A thousand soldiers he shall not fear!
Should King Ping ever capture me—
My mission not yet brought to rest—
Or if I should be arrested,
A hundred to one I shall die.
Stealthy my steps, cautious my tread,
I hold my breath and keep silence.
The wind blows and stirs the grasses,
Swiftly I go into hiding.

His sword song completed, Wu Zixu again went forward. North, he crossed Guangling, and south he climbed Guiji. The passes and fords were closely watched. The provinces and districts increased their surveillance. Militiamen were everywhere and there were continual replacements of guards. Keeping himself carefully hidden, he went forward a step at a time.

Before many days had gone by, he reached the kingdom of Wu. In exact accordance with the instructions of the fisherman, he disheveled his hair and entered the marketplace, daubed mud on his face, cried wildly three loud shouts, and went running swiftly east and west. At that moment a minister of the kingdom of Wu happened to be riding through the marketplace on horseback. He noticed Wu Zixu’s extraordinary appearance and unusual gifts as well as his six-foot frame and, knowing that he would make a worthy minister, went running to inform the king of Wu. “Just after leaving your august presence,” he said, “I was passing through the market and there I saw a gentleman from another land. His face was smeared with mud and he appeared wild; his hair was disheveled and he cried out pitifully as he ran back and forth from east to west. From my scrutiny of his appearance, I am convinced of his worth. I should hope that Your Majesty inquire into the matter thoroughly and have him detained. He must certainly be a knight-errant who harbors an injustice.”

When the king of Wu heard these words, he was pleased and, gathering together his ministers, opened his pearl curtains, and spoke of his dream: “Last night at the third watch, I dreamed that I saw a worthy man entering my realm, upon which my body grew light and my person grew strong so that I could not prevent myself jumping about with joy. Would you, my ministers, carefully discuss this and explain for me whether it portends ill or good?”

When the hundred officials heard these words of the king, they danced and laughed gleefully all at the same time. “Peace!” they sang out together. “Long live the king!” they exclaimed with one voice. “The dream shows that the six-foot gentleman in the marketplace is superbly fitted to your heart. All of your ministers who are present are overcome with joy.”

The king of Wu forthwith ordered an express messenger to go into the marketplace and summon this worthy minister-to-be.

“Inform him on my behalf,” said the king, “that although I have not previously been acquainted with him, I do wish to meet him and that, when he sees me face-to-face, he may express his ambitions.”
As soon as the messenger received these verbal orders, he galloped directly into the marketplace. There he saw Wu Zixu and repeated to him entirely the verbal orders of the king. Zixu respectfully received the king’s mandate and, not daring disobediently to delay, immediately followed the messenger. When they reached the king of Wu’s palace, Wu Zixu went down with his face to the ground. He sobbed and moaned until his voice became hoarse and it was long before he rose. The king of Wu knew that it was Zixu and sympathetically inquired of him, “The king of Chu did not accept loyal admonishment but perversely listened to the words of a sycophantic minister. He unjustly murdered your father and brother. How could he be so bitterly cruel? The sorrow which he caused is beyond description. Such awful pain! Who could have borne it? For you to have crossed mountain walls and river barriers and to have plodded such long distances through wind and cloud to come so far to such a small and narrow kingdom as my own must have caused you great suffering.”

Zixu waited for quite a while and then, smoothing down his hair, spoke: “Your servant’s father and brother were not attentive in the service of their lord and so they were executed by the sovereign of Chu. And I, instead of continuing the family traditions, abandoned my father and left my ruler to flee as fast as I could run. I have heard that, ‘when a kingdom is about to perish, calamities and disasters occur in great profusion just as when a tree is on the verge of snapping, wind and frost press upon it.’ He who is destitute finds it difficult to distinguish black from white; snake and dragon become hopelessly confused. I wished to cut my throat and die but was ashamed to see my ancestors in the netherworld. Therefore, I have placed myself in the hands of a wise ruler like yourself in the hopes that you might understand the workings of my heart. Having grown up in a humble house and dwelling in the grassy wild, I am incapable of serving or supporting a ruler. It would be my great fortune to be accepted on your rolls!”

“My kingdom,” replied the king of Wu, “is of narrow compass and is lacking loyal and honest men. In wishing to establish you as a minister, I realize that this is to compromise your integrity. But I hope you will not feel that it is something disgraceful.”

“I am a small person,” said Zixu “an unworthy recipient of your great favor. To be accepted on your rolls is already an exceptional act of kindness bestowed upon me. But further to be raised to office is something I dare not, in the end, accept. To do so would be to incur the death penalty for my presumption!”

“What do you think?” the king of Wu asked those to his left and right.
All of the ranks of ministers sang out their approval, saying, “Your Majesty has such great influence that even this man from another land has placed himself at your disposal. Make him your helpmate and Minister of State and the entire country will exclaim together: ‘Long live the King!’”

As a minister, Wu Zixu showed determination and moral fortitude. Never was he lax in his thinking. Morning and night he strove, single-mindedly serving his ruler all the while. His speech was not offensive; his words were informed with agreeableness. Men came to him in great numbers from far and near, talented officials appeared in abundance. Heaven’s soldiers were not mobilized, and the war horses’ whips were stayed. Those on the four borders all showed their allegiance, all the eight directions were settled and submissive. No man-made disasters occurred, no natural calamities arose. The people were joyful and sang songs along every road just as in the time of Yao and Shun. Everyone proclaimed: “Our ruler is possessed of a benign influence. Lofty is the sacred sun, revivified are heaven and earth!”
After Zixu had governed the country for one year, the wind blew so softly that it scarcely rustled the branches and the rain fell so gently that it broke not the clods of earth. After he had governed the country for two years, the granaries overflowed with abundance. All under heaven was peace and prosperity. Clerks gave up their greed, officials left off their tyrannous ways. When he had ruled the country for three years, the six barbarians expressed friendliness, and the ten thousand principalities all threw in their lot with Wu. After he had governed the country for four years, the Dragon of Good Prospect visited the land in answer to the auspiciousness of the day and the Red Sparrow came carrying in its beak a letter. Spirit-fungi grew side by side while portentous grain grew multiple spikes. Plowmen gave way over questions regarding where to lay the boundary lines between the fields. And no one picked up articles which had been lost by others on the highways. The Three Teachings\(^6\) flourished side by side and the city-gate never had to be closed. There were no more judicial summonses nor forced labor; people worked for themselves. When Zixu had governed the country for five years, the sun and moon doubled their brilliance. In the markets, there were fixed prices. Cats and mice lived together in the same holes. Rice and wheat were carefully weighted out to the last hundredth of an ounce and the jails were empty of prisoners. Everyone vied to proclaim the harmony of ideals between the king and his minister. Their praise spread far and near. 

Indebted to the minister Wu Zixu for his achievements, the common people all visited his gate and announced: “We wish, on behalf of Minister Wu, to wage war upon Chu.”

Seeing all of these brave men voluntarily enlist, Zixu did not dare to make them his private militia. Instead, he informed the king of Wu: “I am but an unworthy person who has been the recipient of your bountiful favors. Before I have established any merit, how dare I let ambitions stir my heart? I consider that I am of no ability and so, when all is said and done, dare not be presumptuous.”

“I have heard,” replied the king of Wu, “that ‘one prepares for old age by bringing up a child and anticipates the time when one will be decrepit by accumulating good deeds.’ Last year I had thought to commission you to carry out your vengeance but was concerned that the spirit of revenge had not yet sufficiently developed in you. The peace and prosperity of these years are all the result of your efforts. If you do not now avenge the wrong done to your father and brother, how can you be called a filial son? The time is perfect for our kingdom to raise troops and attack Chu.”

And so the king issued a mandate which called for all the brave men of the land to help Minister Wu wreak his vengeance. The text of the mandate read as follows: “Whereas the father and brother of Minister Wu were willfully slaughtered by King Ping, it is our desire today to levy an army which has Heaven on its side for the purpose of punishing Chu, and we do thereby call upon our devoted subjects to enlist in this venture. If there be among you any who will risk his life by following the army into battle, he should come to enlist with the greatest urgency. We shall, at the outset, present heavy rewards. The decorations and emoluments conferred will not be light. If there are any such brave and valiant men, come quickly and present your responses to this our plea!”

Once the mandate had been issued and made known to all those far and near, they came severally to sign up, competing with one another to be the first to respond to the call. The War Office selected, screened, picked, tested, examined, and measured until it had come up with a superior fighting force that could decisively conquer at a distance of a thousand miles. Among its men, there were those capable of bending the bar of a door, tossing logs about, hoisting huge

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\(^6\) Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.
square beams with their hands, jumping high in the air while clasping heavy stones, and shooting an arrow through seven layers of armor.

After the proclamation had been displayed for seven days, nine hundred thousand crack troops were enlisted. Rewards of crimson silk and inducements of green silk were made, each being presented in lots of one thousand bolts. The recruiting officials led them outside the city wall where the ranks were made to stand as straight as a formation of wild geese. The king of Wu then saw his soldiers lined up south of the city and proceeded at once to entertain and cheer these brave warriors. “Today,” he inquired of Wu Zixu, “we wish to attack Chu. How many soldiers should we use?”

“For the present, we’ll need ten thousand soldiers,” was Zixu’s answer.

“Won’t ten thousand soldiers be too few?”

“I have heard,” replied Zixu, “that ‘when a man is determined to die, a hundred others are no match for him. And if one hundred work together with one mind, they range at will anywhere under Heaven.’”

“I feel otherwise,” said the king of Wu. “Only if you lead nine hundred thousand men will you be able to attack Chu.”

The king then established Wu Zixu as the Generalissimo and Commander of the Army, as well as Chief of Mobilization. In accordance with the precepts of the Son of Heaven, he was to avenge his father by wiping clean the injustice he had suffered.

Thereupon, there was a mass slaughter of cattle and sheep and a feast was set up south of the city. There were a thousand casks of wine and ten thousand catties of meat. It was all divided equally, there being no differences of rank when it came to feasting.

The king of Wu went outside the city wall to send Wu Zixu off. “Sir, you need only do your best,” said the king, “and be cautious on your forward march. With Heaven’s mercy, you will certainly be able to carry out the vengeance you hold in your heart. Furthermore, I have nothing to worry about in my kingdom. So you, sir, should not fail the souls of your father and brother in the netherworld. Return promptly as soon as your business is completed. Do not give me cause for concern.”

“Today,” Wu Zixu replied to the king, “as I lead this army on a punitive expedition against Chu, there is no doubt but that the result will be a gratifying one. I should hope that Your Majesty will not worry and fret over me on my distant journey. I expect that, before much time has passed, the affair will be completed and I shall return with the army. For this, I shall be grateful unto death!”

When Wu Zixu had finished his farewell to the king, he launched the troops at once. The sound of forty-two large drums rumbled across the sky, the strident blare of thirty-six horns swept the earth. For a hundred furlongs to the side, the mountain forests shook with the creaking and rumbling of heavy carts and horses. The vanguard, whose role was to take prisoners alive, was the first to take to the road. Like clouds, the formation spread out in all four directions, making a sound which carried across the whole of the wild, open plains. The powerful cavalry charged ahead pell-mell; the brave soldiers leaped forward ferociously like so many scales on a fish. Rank after rank they came, like the wings of wild geese. Lined up shoulder to shoulder, their long lances stood as erect as a forest of trees piercing through the heavens. Restlessly, they strung their bows—palm next to palm—and bent them till they arched like crescent moons. White banners fluttered like falling snow and the battle swords glistened like frost. When their crossbows were released, thunder raced across the sky. When they pulled out their swords, the blades howled in the air.
The General of the Army issued orders so all-embracing that not even a drop of water could have slipped through. The Commanding Officer-in-Charge’s directives were so strict that even a bird would have had trouble flying around them.

There was such an overwhelming sea of soldiers and horses that they stretched out every which way for several hundred furlongs. With clanking golden armor and flashing silver saddles, bounding over hill and forest, they rushed forward tumultuously. Foxes and rabbits raced away in fear. Startled, dragons and snakes outdid each other in scurrying out of sight.

Mounted on his horse, the general boasts a brilliant red flag;
Each and every soldier is lined up according to order.
The vanguard takes to the road—it rushes like the wind—
And soon reaches the northeast bank of the Yellow River.
The vanguard leads the way as it goes bounding forward,
In boats lined up evenly, the army crosses the river.
Those in charge of the crossing man the craft which they have built;
The water’s spray flies.

When the army reached the side of the river, a feast had to be prepared for the soldiers. As soon as the officers had finished eating, they forthwith crossed the river. The wind was with them and the waves were still. The mountain forests glistened; the sun and moon shone pure and bright. Mists rolled back on a blue sky and the clouds drifted out over the broad ocean.

For the simple reason that there were many men, there was a multitude of helping hands and so they reached the west side of the river by dawn. Wu Zixu issued orders to the soldiers of his army, telling them they must be ready to take prisoners as guides for they were now within King Ping’s territory and unfamiliar with its rivers and mountains. First they had to thread their way through dangerous defiles. The far-roving lookouts and long-ranging major-generals exercised their intricate strategy every which way. The guards stealthily advanced and, after more than a month on patrol, their march drew to a close as they approached the capital of Chu.

Unfortunately, King Ping had died some time before. The crown prince had been established as King Zhao and was now in overall command of his country’s forces. When King Zhao heard that Wu Zixu’s army was soon to arrive, he proceeded to levy troops, selecting and screening the bravest of the warriors versed in the use of the five weapons. He rewarded them handsomely with silks and made ample provisions for those who achieved merit. The territory of Chu was extensive and its population so dense that, in no time at all, he had raised a million troops. The Chu army’s banners and streamers blocked out the sun, its uniforms and armor spread across the sky. Formations were deployed in all directions for the purpose of joining battle with Wu Zixu. Battle redoubts were constructed on top of the city wall. At each and every gate ballista were set up. In addition, red-hot molten bronze was prepared. On all four sides of the city, wooden structures with stones which could be rained down on the attackers were erected. Its forces thus fully prepared, the might of the army of Chu was a match for ten thousand men.

King Zhao commanded his brave troops in the attack upon the Wu army. Zixu had deployed his troops in a formation that was every bit as tight as the scales of a fish. Cymbals and gongs resounded with a mighty roar. Three beats were struck on the big drums and, with a great hue and cry, they were off.
A thousand troops were posted at strategic passes leading to Chu, and a detachment of ten thousand posted along the city moat. Before long, the two armies had crossed weapons in battle. The drawn swords made a swishing sound as they cut through the air, lances were smeared with sweat and blood, and arrows fell about wildly. Dust covered the sky and cavalry horses whinnied until their throats cracked. Sustaining enormous losses in their forward push, they advanced only with great effort. But each man had his mind set on death and refused to entertain even the thought of retreat.

The army on the west [i.e., Chu] was badly defeated, its corpses lay strewn across the plains. Their shields and spears no more to see action, the bodies of the men and horses pressed upon each other, layer upon layer.

During the campaign Wu Zixu had fought ten battles and gained nine victories without the loss of a single soldier. When King Zhao saw that his troops were being slaughtered, he ran frightened back inside the city walls with Wu Zixu in hot pursuit, looking for all the world like wind-blown tumbleweed rushing upon a fire. The Wu army followed after him trying to catch up, appearing like so many clouds blown headlong. They fell upon and utterly exterminated the Chu army as easily as though one were splashing boiling water upon snow.

Zixu shook his whip and declared to King Zhao: “Your father, King Ping, must be considered highly unprincipled. He picked out a bride for his son, but then took her as his own concubine. A faithful minister remonstrated against this and was slaughtered, whereas when a deceitful minister engaged in reckless flattery he was presented with a fief. Your father murdered my father and brother! Dying so unjustly, they suffered great bitterness. Today, I have come to avenge the punishment meted out to my father—that alone can bring joy to my heart! I want, now, to devour your heart! But that, in itself, will not be enough. Even though ten thousand armed men come against me, they will be no match for my solitary person.

“Today, I am going to take your father’s bones and your own living body as a sacrifice to the souls of my father and brother! Only then shall I be content!”

Fearful at heart, King Zhao at once displayed a white flag and surrendered. The Wu army let out a great cry and straightaway entered the capital of Chu. They hunted for King Zhao and razed his palace. King Zhao abandoned the city and fled, but was captured by Prime Minister Wu, who bound his hands behind his back, and demanded, “King Zhao, where, now, is your father’s tomb?”

“My father, King Ping,” replied King Zhao to Wu Zixu, “has already gone the way of all living things. He bears the guilt of having committed a crime against you and has been condemned to dwell in the netherworld. Since the matter is one of “an eye for an eye,” I myself shall submit to dismemberment. Father’s guilt thus borne by his son, what use have you for his corpse? To satisfy your desire for revenge, please feel free to use your battle-axe and halberd on my neck.”

King Zhao was tortured and, not being able to bear up under the suffering nor endure the pain, he revealed the location of his father’s tomb.

Zixu captured Wei Ling and had him dismembered. He wrenched out his heart and liver and hacked his body into a thousand pieces. Then he executed all the nine degrees of Wei Ling’s kindred.

Zixu unceremoniously called King Zhao and said to him: “My father was murdered and cast into the deep river.” Whereupon, ceasing all else, he had the current dammed up. Having recovered the bones of King Ping, he took them together with the hearts and livers of Wei Ling and King Zhao to the riverside. With them, he sacrificed to the souls of his father and brother,
saying, “I, Zixu, deeply and humbly recognize how unfilial I have been. How sharply painful it
was when you, my father and brother, were unjustly slaughtered! But what could I do? At that
time, my power had not yet grown sufficiently and so year after year slipped by. Today,
however, I have slain the father and son who were so unjust and shall cast them into the deep
river in respectful sacrifice to my father and brother. May your souls accept my offering.”

When he had finished the sacrifice, Zixu broke out into loud crying that moved the sun
and the moon to stop their light, the rivers to churn and seethe. All of a sudden, the clouds and
mists darkened, the earth trembled and the hills shook. The multitude of soldiers fought to hold
back their tears; all mankind was grief-stricken. Fish and dragons swallowed their tears, the
river waters forgot to tide. Mountain streams were exhausted and fountains dried up. The dust-
adorned winds blew cruelly.

When Zixu had finished his sacrifice, the deep hatred which gripped his heart caused him
to take out his sword and again hack at the white bones of King Ping. At the stroke of the sword,
blood flowed from the bones just as when a lamb is being slaughtered. A fire was made and the
bones burned. When the wind blew, the fine ashes of the bones soared aloft on it.

Again, Wu Zixu grasped his sword and hacked King Zhao into a hundred pieces. These
he threw into the river where the fish and turtles ate them. “Now you have ended up the same as
my father,” he thought to himself.

Wu Zixu searched for his father’s and brother’s bones but could not find them. In their
stead, he erected a tower, which can be seen today at a place forty-odd miles south of Bozhou.
In later ages, people were unaware of the significance of this place, which is the present-day
Chengfu district.

Zixu regrouped his forces and made ready to return, intending to attack the two countries
of Liang and Zheng. “King Ping of Chu was a man without principle,” he wrote in a letter to the
king of Zheng. “He unjustly executed my father and brother. Zishang was a minister of yours.
Why did you not think of some way to help him? Instead, treating him as a petty servant, you
sent him to his death at the hands of the king of Chu. Vengeance has compelled me to destroy
the king of Chu, and now I shall turn my troops against Zheng!”

When the king of Zheng received this letter, he was flustered and frightened beyond
measure. He had no idea at all what course he should take. He wanted to raise troops to resist
the enemy but was fearful that his soldiers would not win. So he issued a summons for someone
who could devise a secret strategy: “Whoever can stop the army of Wu will be given a part of
my kingdom to rule over in consort with me and I addition a gift of one thousand catties of
gold.”

There was a fisherman’s son who answered the summons by volunteering his services: “I
can stop the army of Wu without need for so much as ‘an inch of soldier or a foot of sword.’ All
I shall need is a small boat, an oar or punting pole, a pair of salted fish, a bowl of wheat gruel
and a wooden cup full of fine wine. The boat, along with all of these things, should be placed in
the water at the east of the city wall. Naturally, I have a way of putting them to use.”

The king of Zheng, in accordance with what he had said, had a boat and all the rest
sought out and placed in the water. The fisherman got in the boat, and plying his oar and singing
a long ballad, cruised about on the moat. The king of Zheng closed the western gate of the city
and, from atop the city wall, looked in the distance to see what sort of plan he had devised that
could turn back the army of Wu.
When Wu Zixu’s forces were just over ten miles away from the capital of Zheng, he sent several able-bodied men ahead to see how many soldiers and horses Zheng could put against him. When they reached the capital they found the four city gates tightly closed. Again, when they walked over to the area outside the eastern gate, they discovered in the moat a solitary figure aboard a boat with a tattered top who now spoke and now sang: “Man in the reeds are you not a gentleman in distress? I have a cup of good wine, five catties of fish, ten biscuits, and a pot of gruel. Please come to my boat and eat them!

“Ill-fate please take in natural stride,  
Good luck, you know, is what I wish you.  
If you but serve a virtuous king,  
Glory, riches, and honor will be yours.  
Should the matter be handled equitably,  
I pray you, don’t allow yourself to abandon me.”

Having heard these words of the boatman, the leader of the party returned at once. When he reached Wu Zixu’s side, he told him in full the words of the boatman. Upon hearing them, Zixu knew right away that he was the son of the boatman and was pleased.

“When I bore enmity that absolutely had to be wiped clean, it was due to him that I was able to live through it. How could I possibly be ungrateful? He who, when wealthy and honored, forgets the days of his penury, High Heaven does not assist. ‘To receive a kindness but not repay it—can such a one be called a man? But he who repays a kindness which he has received is both genteel and elegant.’”

Zixu reined in his horse, put his whip in its case, and went down to the water’s edge where he clasped the young man in his embrace. Patting him on the back, Wu Zixu cried mournfully as he offered his condolences: “How bitter it was for your father to have drowned in that deep river! But what could I do? Oh, what could I do? I hope you do not harbor any animosity against me for that.”

The king of Zheng had grown frightened and came out from within the city wall to welcome Wu Zixu. Stepping forward, he said: “General, I have heard that your vengeance has been achieved and am happy to congratulate you on this great joy! Today, although I deserve a punishment worse than death, I beg you to preserve this wisp of a life.”

“My brother,” said Wu Zixu to the king, “was in your service. You should have given him shelter, but instead, you perversely played up to King Ping and so sent him to his death. Inasmuch as my brother died, you must pay with your life!”

“A messenger from afar came bearing a letter,” replied the king of Zheng, “in which it was stated that your father’s crime would be remitted. I myself was not clear about the details and so sent your brother to go and have a look, saying that he should come back within a month. I never imagined that King Ping would execute him. Now, I know that I deserve death for this and am content to die without a murmur. But that you, great general, have been able to wreak your vengeance and destroy the ancestral temples of your enemy makes me so happy I could skip and jump. I cannot congratulate you enough! I humbly pray you to be generous and beg that you will spare my life.”

“Great General,” the boatman spoke up, “the reason I was enlisted by the king of Zheng was because the armies of Wu were coming to attack him. He proclaimed that anyone who could repulse the forces of Wu would be awarded a thousand catties of gold and a fief of ten...
thousand households. I am desirous of getting that generous reward. How do you feel about this?"

“You have not claimed my life,” said Wu Zixu, “if your wishes are to halt my troops and to claim the reward, how dare I go against them?”

Being thus persuaded by the fisherman, Wu Zixu at once set free the king of Zheng. The king was delighted and so he assembled a mountain of wine and food. For three days and three nights, he feasted the entire army of Wu.

Wu Zixu proceeded to appoint the fisherman’s son ruler of Chu and the two countries of Chu and Zheng lived together in peace.

Before long, Wu Zixu had again set out with his righteous army, this time to attack the ruler of Liang. When the king of Liang heard that the arrival of the army of Wu was imminent, he proceeded to slaughter a thousand head of cattle and to stew ten thousand sheep. Food and drinks were piled high as hills and mountains. Lined up along the sides of the road, canopies were set up and mats spread out.

Upon the arrival of the army of Wu, the king of Liang, crawling on his elbows and knees, prostrated himself before Wu Zixu and respectfully addressed him: “It is my humble desire that you will show me generosity—I beg that you will spare my life. Recently, we heard that you, oh general, have punished Chu, at which news we were overcome with rejoicing. Though at a distance, we celebrated your joy so profoundly that we skipped and jumped.”

“Because it was an urgent matter,” Wu Zixu replied, “and because you did not arrange some plan for retaining me, I bear a grudge against you and so have come to punish you.”

Zixu saw the wine and food lined up south of the city wall and asked the king of Liang what it was for. “This wine and food,” replied the king to the great general, “May be used to provide for your troops.”

Hearing these words, Zixu at once ordered all of his troops to eat their fill, which, to be sure, they proceeded to do. One of the soldiers who had stuffed himself on the food and was feeling rather ebullient reminded Wu Zixu: “Whoever receives one meal from another is indebted to him to that extent; whoever receives two meals from another cannot thank him enough.” Upon which the other soldiers and generals all joined in: “These words, great General, are well spoken! Let us not attack the king of Liang.”

“If I bear another enmity,” Wu Zixu reflected in his heart, “then I will be intent upon obliterating him. But if another enables me to live, how can I be ungrateful?” Whereupon he absolved the king of Liang of all guilt. His words scarcely finished, he prepared to march. His troops having been recalled, they went as far as the shores of the River Ying, where Wu Zixu looked toward the sky and sighed: “When formerly I came to this place during my flight, I sought food from a maiden here. Not only did she accede to my request but, clutching a stone, threw herself into the river and died. Today I have nothing other than this to repay the kindness of the maiden.” And, in complete accord with the promise he had kept alive, he proceeded to take out one hundred pieces of gold and throw them into the River Ying. Then he addressed her soul:

When formerly I was fleeing toward Wu in the south,
We met by the roadside and there I begged food of you.
I was indebted to you for the noonday meal you gave me,
But you clasped a stone and leaped to your death in the river.
Many years have passed since the time when we parted;
Yet day and night I have remembered you all this time—
I think of your spirit tossed on the waves,
Of your wandering soul drifting through briars and thorns.”

His address finished, he held back his tears and spoke these words:

*May your soul in the netherworld know what I hold within my heart.*
*Having cast your body so chaste to its fluvial death,*
*May you never in the Land of Shades heave a lonely sigh!*
*The road to the netherworld is cut off—I know not what you feel;*  
*Life and Death, since eternity, have gone their separate ways.*  
*Since there is nothing else for me to present to you,*
*I can but take these hundred gold pieces as a mortuary requital”*

When Wu Zixu had finished his service to the dead, he turned his troops around and marched to his sister’s house. There he caught hold of his two nephews, Zi’an and Ziyong. He shaved off all the hair on their heads, cut off their ears, and knocked out their incisors. “Years ago, during my flight, I begged for food from your mother. You wished to capture me and turn me over to King Ping of Chu. Today, I have avenged myself. May you be slaves forever!”

The Heaven-protected army, being under a time limitation, could not linger there long and so, horses racing fast as a stroke of lighting or a meteorite, it marched to the dwelling of Zixu’s wife. He intended to meet his wife there and return with her to the kingdom of Wu. He knocked on the door at once and called out, but his wife stayed hidden in the courtyard behind the locked gate. Separated by the courtyard wall, she answered him from afar saying that she would not admit him.

“When years ago, I met with trouble in Chu,” replied Wu Zixu to his wife, “I was beholden to you for having come out to welcome me. Now I have avenged myself upon Chu and, returning with my troops, gave come to see you. I had hoped that things would be as they were in days gone by. Why do you withdraw from me behind closed doors, so that I cannot see your face? Or is it that you have some other affection? What makes you so shy that you’ll not receive me? Since that time when we parted, I have often thought of your kindness. My indebtedness to you was, indeed, not light and so I refrained from calling upon you.”

“When, years ago, you met with trouble in Chu,” replied his wife, “the road which you took passed by here. You knocked on my gate and, when I saw your face, I knew right away that you had been wronged and were in danger. And so I eagerly responded as I always had done. But you resisted me as though I were taboo and refused to recognize me, which pained me so greatly I could not bear it. The bond between husband and wife is a weighty one and I had hoped that you would live and die together with me. It was you who first gave me no slight insult. Subsequently, I developed an aversion to you and will not now receive you. When you were poor and without position, you paid me no notice. Now that you are rich and honored, why make a pretense of lifting me up? I covet neither wealth nor splendor and would hope that you understand my feelings!”

Zixu then admitted he had committed a sin punishable by death. Separated by the gate, he prostrated himself and, begging forgiveness, kowtowed to his wife. His wife, seeing how chivalrous he was being, proceeded to open the door and admit him. Their kindness and love restored to what it was in days of old and their lives rejoined, they made ready to return to Wu.
Zixu issued orders to the three armies that they were to join up in units in a single line. On this day, all under heaven was clear and peaceful. The sun by day and the moon by night shone pure and bright. Jade whip tapping a steady rhythm against silver saddle, he sang this song:

*Ah, nothing can match my Heaven-protected army!*
*Thousands and ten thousands of units fill river and plain.*
*With one sweep, they erase ten thousand miles of dust and dirt;*
*The Chu armies crumbled before their onslaught like bits of tile.*
*Brave men in communication with great principles,*
*Taking up sword and gathering armor, they went to distant war.*
*My warriors are courageous as tigers and leopards;*
*My cavalrmen are ferocious as real dragons.*
*Deployed, they are a low-hanging cloud spread across the land,*
*A heavenly host, this flock of cranes ascends to the sky*
*They go wherever they please without opposition;*
*They shall rule the ten thousand lands, who one and all revert to them.*
*Happy, oh happy, yes how happy we are today;*
*Joyful, oh joyful, yes how joyful we are today!*
*My golden whip taps the rhythm, our voices join together;*
*We follow the road and before long shall enter Wu.*

The war horses mingled all together in noisy profusion and the stallions of the cavalry neighed and whinnied. The great armies were vast in number. Amidst tall, green pines and short, tawny grasses, jade whips sounded refreshingly clear and golden saddles sparkled with exquisite fineness. Day and night they continued on their long journey and before long reached Wu.

The king of Wu heard that Zixu had gained the victory and so, with a mounted escort, came out to greet him. When Zixu saw that the king had come out personally to welcome him, he got down from his horse and, prostrating himself, paid obeisance to the king. In a loud voice, he inquired about his health and then proclaimed: “Since parting from Your Dragon Countenance, your humble servant has ever remembered not to be lax. I was granted by you the use of an army to attack Chu. The troops and I were of one mind so that there was no resistance to my commandship—together, we exerted ourselves in perfect unity.

“The army eventually reached the northern side of the river and camped there in the southern part of Chu. Unfortunately, King Ping had already died. The crown prince had been established as King Zhao and was ruling over his country and military. When he heard that I arrived with my army, he came out to oppose me and so our two armies clashed. I sent my bravest soldiers to cut off his rear and dispatched fierce generals in a frontal attack. Directly we destroyed the Chu army. Its men and horses, layer upon layer, pressed upon each other. Their bodies were strewn across the plain, their blood stained the hills and streams. It was as though a falcon had swooped down on a crow or a goose; it was like a leopard attacking a fox or a rabbit. There is a common saying which goes, ‘If you lift up the Koukun Mountains and set them down on an egg, how could the egg possibly not be destroyed. If you pick up a torch and burn a hair with it, how could the hair not be utterly consumed?’

“When King Zhao saw that his forces were being routed, he immediately ran back inside the city walls and hid there. I followed him in swift pursuit and quickly captured him. The
hatred which I bore him was especially deep, and so I sliced King Zhao into one hundred pieces. The decayed bones of King Ping I hacked with my sword and blood flowed out of them. When I beheld the aftermath, my thirst for vengeance came to rest.

“All was well with the warriors of Wu. But the corpses of the slain Chu soldiers were strewn across the entire plain. It was because of your might, oh King, that my desire for vengeance was satisfied. I am deeply beholden to you, great King, and endlessly look up to Heaven.

“We had lost not a horse nor solider; uniforms and armor were all intact. Among all the others, there are some especially valiant men. I pray that you reward them for their achievements and efforts.”

“Since saying goodbye to you sir,” said the king of Wu, “I have thought of you affectionately. You were never out of my mind. I was worried that the Chu troops might be too numerous and that you would not be able to carry out the vengeance which you bore in your heart. But Heaven has assisted you, allowing you to destroy Chu and return to Wu. As to all those who performed worthy service, I shall make especially liberal provision for them.”

Following the king, and along with the various troop units, Wu Zixu entered the city. Shields and spears were inspected and collected; rewards were granted for achievement and effort. Among the others, the fierce generals of the vanguard were each awarded scarlet silks and presented with the Order of the Gold Fish. The flag-carriers and standard-bearers were all given suitable positions. The remainder of the soldiers were each presented with a decoration known as “Pillar of the State.” Before long there was dancing and laughter while everyone proclaimed the suasive influence of the king. Seeing that Wu Zixu had the makings of a great man, the king proceeded to establish him as Grand Minister of the Kingdom.

Afterwards, the king of Yue, Goujian, having raised troops and mobilized his hosts, came to attack the armies of Wu. A wise minister of Yue, Fan Li, remonstrated with the king of Yue, saying, “The kingdom of Wu has a wise minister called Wu Zixu. Above, he is learned in astrology; below, he is learned in geomancy. He has established himself through mastery of civil virtue and command of the military arts. He has an unusual countenance and a remarkable spirit. As Grand Minister of the kingdom of Wu, he is at the head of the state. If, today, you attack Wu, you will certainly bring ruin upon yourself?”

“My plans,” replied the king of Yue, “are already formulated. I cannot stop in midcourse.” So he raised troops and mobilized his host, and went to attack the armies of Wu.

When the troops of Yue came in attack, the king of Wu sent his Minister of State, Wu Zixu, at the head of his troops to go in counter-attack. Zixu led the soldiers to join in battle with the troops from Yue. He slew so many of the soldiers of Yue that their corpses lay strewn across the entire plain. The blood was “enough to set a pestle afloat.”

Seeing that his troops were being slaughtered, the king of Yue together with Fan Li sought refuge on Guiji Mountain to escape disaster. There, the king of Yue and Fan Li sent word to Minister Wu, saying, “Seeing that you, Minister of State, had taken vengeance on behalf of your father, we came to pay a visit. We had no intention of coming to make an attack.”

“If it weren’t that I accede to the words of the wise minister, Fan Li,” Zixu said upon hearing this, “the king of Yue along with his whole kingdom would perish.”

After the king of Yue had withdrawn his troops and returned to his own land, then the king of Wu became ill. When the king was on the point of death, he enjoined Crown Prince Fucha, saying, “In future, when you are pacifying the country and ruling the people, in
everything follow the words of the state minister, Wu Zixu.” After the king of Wu died, Crown Prince Fucha became the new ruler of Wu.

At that time, the new king of Wu had a dream during the night in which he saw a mysterious glow in the upper part of this hall. In a second dream, he saw dense greenery atop the city walls. In a third dream, he saw beneath the southern wall of his room a coffer, and beneath the northern wall a pannier. In a fourth dream, he saw soldiers joined in battle at the city gate. And in a fifth dream he saw blood flowing to the southeast. The king of Wu immediately sent for Premier Pi to explain the dreams. “The dream in which you saw a mysterious glow in the upper part of your hall,” said Premier Pi, “means happiness and wealth in abundance. Dense greenery atop the city wall means richness descending like hoar-frost. The coffer beneath the southern wall of your room and the pannier beneath the northern wall mean that you, O King, will have a long life. Soldiers joined in battle at the city gate means that your defenses will be tightly interwoven. Blood flowing to the southeast means that the armies of Yue will perish.”

The king of Wu then sent for Wu Zixu to explain his dreams. Zixu was learned in astrology among the arts of Heaven in geomancy among the arts of Earth, and in between, he understood human emotions. He was versed in civil affairs and had a command of military strategies. And he was in communication with every sort of ghost and spirit in all their transformations. “My interpretation of these dreams,” said Wu Zixu, “is that they presage terrible ill-omen. If you, O King, follow these words of Premier Pi, the kingdom of Wu will surely perish.”

“How is this?” the king asked incredulously.

Wu Zixu straightforwardly explained the dreams: “The dream in which you saw a mysterious glow in the upper part of the hall means that an important person will come. Dense greenery atop the city walls means that thorns and briars will be everywhere. The coffer beneath the southern wall of your room and the pannier beneath the northern wall means that you, king, will lose your throne. The soldiers joined in battle at the city gate mean that the armies of Yue will arrive. Blood flowing to the southeast means that corpses will be everywhere. The armies and kingdom of Wu shall be destroyed, and all because of the words of Premier Pi.”

When the king heard these words of Wu Zixu, he rolled his eyeballs and glared in anger. Striking the steps which led to his throne, he ranted loudly: “Disputatious old minister! All you do is curse our land!”

Having completed his explanations of the dreams, Wu Zixu saw that the king was angry with him and so tucked up his robe and went down from the hall.

“Why, sir, do you tuck up your robe and go down from the hall?” the king of Wu asked Wu Zixu.

“Thorns and briars,” replied Wu Zixu, “have sprung up in your hall and they are pricking my feet. That is why I tuck up my robe and go down from the hall.”

The king presented Zixu with the sword “Illuminating Jade,” commanding him to go and commit suicide. When Wu Zixu received the king’s sword, he made a statement to all of the hundred officials: “After I am dead, cut off my head, take it and place it so that it hangs above the eastern gate of the city wall. In this way, I shall see the armies of Yue when they come to attack the kingdom of Wu!”

After Wu Zixu was executed, Yue requested a loan of four million piculs of grain from Wu, which the king of Wu proceeded to give to the king of Yue. The stipulated amount of grain was delivered in installments. Subsequently, the king of Yue had the grain steamed and returned to Wu and wrote a letter in which he reported to the king of Wu: “This grain is excellent. You
may give it to your people to plant.” The grain that was used to repay Wu had been steamed and when sown in the earth not a single grain germinated. The people of Wu having lost their livelihood, there was one year of dearth and five years of famine.

Thereupon, the king of Yue consulted with Fan Li: “The kingdom of Wu, in pacifying the land and ruling over the people, mostly takes the advice of Premier Pi. What stratagem shall you and I design, sir, whereby we can attack the armies of Wu?”

“The king of Wu,” Fan Li informed the king, “ordered the wise minister of his kingdom, Wu Zixu, to commit suicide. When a house is without a strong beam, it will inevitably collapse. If a wall is not made of good earth, before long it will crumble. If a kingdom is without loyal ministers, how can it but degenerate? Now, there is a flattering minister, Premier Pi, who can certainly be won by bribery.”

“But what should we use to bribe him?” asked the king.

“Premier Pi delights in gold and jewels,” Fan Li informed the king, “and likes beautiful girls. If he can obtain these things, he will certainly open a way for us. Of that you can rest assured.”

When the king of Yue heard these words of Fan Li, he then dispatched emissaries to the Li River to get yellow gold, to Jing Mountain to seek for white jade, to the eastern sea to gather lustrous pearls, and to the southern kingdoms to solicit beautiful maidens. After the king of Yue had procured these things, he sent valiant men to take them to the kingdom of Wu and present them to Premier Pi. Pi saw that, among these things, the beautiful maidens were nimble and shapely, the lustrous pearls shone brilliantly, the yellow gold flashed and sparkled, and the white jade was without blemish.

Yue made the presentation to Premier Pi and he joyfully accepted it. The king of Yue, seeing that this obsequious minister had accepted the bribe, made demands upon him.

“When the king of Wu had Wu Zixu killed,” the king again inquired of Fan Li, “did not the kingdom of Wu go two years without a harvest? The people have, up to this day, experienced five years of dearth and famine.”

The king of Yue called Fan Li to him and asked, “Today, I wish to attack the kingdom of Wu. What do you think of this matter?”

“If you attack Wu now,” Fan Li replied, “it is the best possible of times.”

Whereupon the king of Yue raised troops and mobilized his host to the number of four hundred thousand men. When they had reached the halfway point in their march, he was afraid that the soldiers might be at variance with him. Along the way, he came across an angry frog which was croaking vociferously beside the road. He dismounted and gathered it up in his arms.

“For what reason, O King,” his assistants asked, “do you embrace this angry frog?”

“All my life, I have been fond of valiant men,” the king answered. “This angry frog was croaking vociferously by the road, so I dismounted and gathered it up in my arms.”

Each soldier among his host reflected to himself: “The king, upon seeing an angry frog, will even go so far as to dismount from his horse and gather it up in his arms. We, too, must strive to be robust and strong. Then, when the king sees us, he will consider us even as he does the angry frog.”

Thus, to a man, the soldiers took on courage and shouted vociferously three times. Seeing that his troops were at such a pitch, the king presented them all with generous rewards.

They marched until they reached a place where a small river opened into a larger one. They paused on the banks of the smaller river before crossing it. Someone gave the king a gourd full of wine. The king drank from it but could not finish, and so poured it out into the river,
saying, “Soldiers, drink together with me!” The soldiers all prepared to drink the river’s waters. Without exception, they smelled the vapors of wine in the water. The soldiers drank the river water and all got drunk. When the king heard report of this, he was greatly pleased.

_A single portion of unstrained wine tossed in the river,_
_And the three armies are reported drunk._

The king of Yue led his armies north across the mouth of the river, intending to go on to the kingdom of Wu. The king of Wu heard that Yue was coming to attack him, but seeing as his people were hungry and their strength flagged, he had no one to put against the enemy.

That night, the king of Wu saw in a dream the loyal minister, Wu Zixu, who spoke a word with him: “Yue is leading troops to come to attack. King, you may well ponder it!”

The king of Wu at once sent for his hundred ministers and took counsel with them. “I saw in a dream the loyal minister, Wu Zixu, who spoke to me these words: “Yue is leading troops to come to attack. King, you may well ponder it!” …

At this point the text breaks off. Following the usual historical narratives, we would expect that the narrative concludes with a scene in which the Yue armies invade and capture the capital of Wu. The fall of Wu would be witnessed, of course, by Wu Zixu’s head hanging on the city wall.