THE YUEJUE SHU

Introduction

The Yuejue shu is a heterogeneous collection of essays, compiled at the very beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty. It is a privately produced text, unlike many other surviving ancient texts, which were either written for a king or emperor, edited by imperial librarians, or compiled from state archives. It took some time before the book made its way into the imperial library. The earliest references to the Yuejue shu in imperial library catalogues date from the Sui and Tang dynasties, and describe a book in sixteen juan (fascicles), attributed to Zigong, a disciple of Confucius who was an extremely successful merchant. In the Liang dynasty (907–923), authorship was reattributed to the famous minister Wu Zixu. However as early as the Tang dynasty, Sima Zhen had noted that the Yuejue shu made reference to events that occurred long after the destruction of Wu in 473 BCE and the conquest of Yue by the kingdom of Chu in the Warring States era, and so he rejected the attribution of this text to Zigong or indeed any other Spring and Autumn period figure. In the Song dynasty, Chen Zhensun

1 The significance of the Yuejue shu as a “local” text, as opposed to “metropolitan” texts composed by individuals with access to court archives is stressed in Chia-li Luo, “Coastal Culture and Religion in Early China: A study through comparison with the Central Plains” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1999), 18–19.

2 See Wei Zheng et al., Suishu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 33:960; Liu Xu 刘昫 et al., Jiutangshu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 47:1993; Ouyang Xiouliang, Song Qi 宋祁 et al., Xin Tangshu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 56:1463. All these catalogues refer to a text in sixteen fascicles. However the Song dynasty imperial library catalogue records a Yuejue shu in fifteen fascicles; see Tuotuo 脫腸 et al., Songshi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 204:1566. This latter copy of the text is described in by the Song dynasty scholar Zhao Xibian 趙希弁; quoted in Sun Meng 孫猛, Junzhai dushu zhi jiaozheng 郡齋讀書志校證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 1228. This recension of the text lacked the first chapter, “Basic Matters” but was otherwise identical in chapter title and order to the transmitted version.

陳振孫 (c. 1190–after 1249) was the first scholar to propose a two stage process of composition for this book, suggesting that the bulk of the Yuejue shu was written after the end of the Warring States period, then revised and added to in the Han dynasty. The theory of a multi-stage composition is now generally accepted, though scholars assign different dates to the phases of assembly of this book.

It was only in the Ming dynasty that a solution was finally proposed for the riddle poem in the final chapter, which resulted in the compilers of the Yuejue shu being identified as two otherwise unknown scholars: Yuan Kang and Wu Ping. The identity of the individual who solved the Yuejue shu riddle is not known, but it is clear that the solution was arrived at during the Zhengde 正德 (1506–1521)—Jiajing 嘉靖 (1522–1566) reign eras in the Ming dynasty, for it is mentioned in the work of a wide variety of scholars. A number of modern scholars claim that it was Yang Shen 杨慎 (1488–1599) who solved the riddle, but although he discusses the solution in the Danqian zalu 丹鉛雜錄 (Miscellaneous Records of Cinnabar and Lead), he does not claim to have accomplished it himself. Although from the Ming dynasty onwards, the solution proposed for the poem at the end of the final chapter of the Yuejue shu has been generally accepted, and compilation of the text attributed to Yuan Kang and Wu Ping, nothing is known about their biographies other than the highly cryptic remarks in the riddle itself. For example, this poem seems to suggest that Yuan Kang was a native of Kuaiji:

When Yu went on his eastern progress,  
He died and was buried at the borders [of his (ie. Yuan Kang’s) place].

In the case of Wu Ping, nothing other than his name is known, though the poem in the last chapter of the Yuejue shu suggests that he did not have a happy life. Given the paucity of information, the details of the trials and tribulations that he faced can only be speculated about. The relevant lines read:

4 See Chen Zhensun 陳振孫, Zhizhai shulu jieti 直齋書錄解題 (Changsha: Shangwuyinshuguan, 1939), 136.
5 See Yang Shen 杨慎, Danqian zalu 丹鉛雜錄 (Congshu jicheng ed.), 79. For another account of the solution to this riddle from a contemporary; see for example Tian Yiheng 田藝蘅, Liuqing rizha 留青日札 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 309.
6 Yuejue shu, 108 ["Pianxu"].