CHAPTER FIVE

THE BOOK OF THE YOUNG MASTER OF ACCOUNTANCY

Introduction

From the mid-Warring States period onwards, economics was increasingly seen as an important branch of government and military theory. In particular, economic growth was crucial for funding ever-larger armies in an era of constant warfare. Almost all major Chinese philosophers developed economic theories in their works. However at the same time economic thought was held in some contempt in China; it was seen as inextricably linked with the despised profession of trade, and hence was considered unworthy of attention by the ruling elite. The “Jinizi neijing” (the full title of this chapter of the Yuejue shu can be translated as either ‘Inner Classic of the Book of Young Master Ji’ or ‘Inner Classic of the Book of the Young Master of Accountancy’) is among the earliest surviving ancient Chinese economic texts, and one of the least studied.¹ This chapter of the Yuejue shu is one of only two designated as a neijing. This designation reflects its great importance in the development of early Chinese economic thought, and perhaps also the care taken to transmit the text. In the “Narratives of Virtue,” the focus of this chapter is said to be on the value of understanding natural cycles, an important theme of the text:

By reading the “Young Master of Accountancy”
You can understand the significance of calculating yin and yang.²

“Jinizi” is not only the title of this book, but also the name given to the advisor to the king of Yue who recounts the economic and moral

¹ The only detailed recent study of the economic theory of the Jinizi is found in Hu Jichuang 胡寄窗, Zhongguo jingji sixiang shi 中國經濟思想史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1978), 174–198. However in this book these theories are attributed to a minister at the Yue court, Fan Li.
² Yuejue shu, 103 [“Dexu”].
theories found in this text. A number of the theories first articulated in this chapter were later to become crucial in the development of Chinese economic thought in antiquity, once adopted by more popular and widely circulated authors. The historical status of the supposed author of this chapter: Ji Ran 计然, and the details of his biography, have been the subject of considerable debate. The first text to attribute authorship of the “Book of the Young Master of Accountancy” to an individual named Ji Ran is the Shi ji, in the Western Han dynasty. The attribution is indirect: the Shi ji quotes several sections of this text and states that these economic theories were expounded by a man named Ji Ran to King Goujian of Yue. According to the Shi ji, Ji Ran was a key figure in the economic reconstruction of Yue after their defeat by the forces of Wu. Although other members of the Yue administration of this period, such as Fan Li and Grandee Zhong, are a great deal more famous, Ji Ran is here said to have played a crucial role:

In the past King Goujian of Yue was besieged on top of Kuaiji, and then he employed Fan Li and Ji Ran … [King Goujian] repaired the state for a decade, and the kingdom became wealthy, he lavishly rewarded his soldiers, and these knights rushed to their arrows and slingshots as though they were thirsty and were about to be given drink. Then he revenged himself upon powerful Wu, and sent his troops to oversee the Central States, and was entitled one of the five hegemons.3

The only available biographical information about Ji Ran is found in the Jijie 集解 (Collected Expositions) commentary to the Shi ji by Pei Yin 裴骃 (fl. 5th century). According to this, Ji Ran was Fan Li’s teacher, and he had the personal name of Yan 雁. This passage associates Ji Ran with the group of foreign advisors recruited by the governments of Wu and Yue, both of which relied heavily at this time upon ministers trained in other parts of China. Pei Yin quotes a lost text, the Fanzi 范子 (Book of Master Fan [Li]), as saying:

Ji Ran came from Pushang in Caiqiu, his surname was Xin and his style-name was Wenzi, and his ancestor was a scion of the state of Jin who had gone into exile. He happened to travel south to Yue where Fan Li employed him as his teacher.4

3 Shi ji, 129:3256.
4 Shi ji, 129:3256–3257, note 1.