CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RECORD OF FANBO

Introduction

Fan Li was, with his friend and colleague Grandee Zhong, one of the most important advisors to the great King Goujian of Yue. In spite of his signal role in the history of the conflict between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue virtually nothing is known of his life. This is perhaps a reflection of the tradition that Fan Li came from a humble background in the kingdom of Chu—unlike other important ministers who played a significant part in these events, such as Prime Minister Pi and Wu Zixu, who were both of noble origins and whose ancestors had played an important role in international affairs for many generations. The “Record of Fanbo” represents an early stage in the development of Fan Li’s biography. The focus of this chapter is on his achievements as a poor and unknown individual who raised himself entirely through his own efforts to the position of trusted advisor to one of the greatest of all rulers in the Spring and Autumn period, King Goujian of Yue. Fan Li is credited in this, as in other chapters of the Yuejue shu, with a crucial role in supporting his master through the difficult years following his surrender at Kuaiji. He is also said to have been instrumental in planning the final victory over the kingdom of Wu in 473 BCE. What is more, unlike his companion Grandee Zhong, Fan Li is supposed to have left Yue in time to escape the suspicions of his ruler, to live a long and happy life.

Despite his humble origins, Fan Li would prove to be an exceptionally important figure in traditional Chinese literature and popular religion, quite apart from his historical significance. Although there are few hints of it in texts prior to the Age of Disunion, Fan Li would eventually become the hero of one of the great love stories of ancient China. According to legend, he was the lover of the beautiful Xi Shi, and set aside their relationship that she might be sent to seduce King Fuchai of Wu for the benefit of the kingdom of Yue. After the fall of Wu he was said to have spirited her away from the final cataclysm. This romantic story of
true love sacrificed for the national good was to prove enormously popular throughout the imperial era, and is known in countless versions. However, this romantic legend was not the only way in which Fan Li was remembered. He was the putative author of a number of texts on craft, agriculture and fish-farming, as well as the author of *Fan Li licai zhifu shier faze* 史淼理財致富十二法則 (Fan Li’s Twelve Principles for Getting Rich). Unfortunately, of the many texts ascribed to Fan Li in catalogues of the imperial library, none survive.

Fan Li was also deified in Chinese popular religion under two separate guises; in some quarters he was worshipped as a god of wealth (*caishen* 財神) and he was also the god of pottery worshipped at Yixing 宜興. The origins of the first deification are apparently related to his fame in historical texts such as the *Shiji* 史記 as an economics thinker, an aspect that would be impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of accounts of the romance of Fan Li and Xi Shi in classical and modern Chinese literature. There are an enormous number of poems on the subject; see for example Wang Qi 王琦, *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 1027 ["Xi Shi 西施"]; Chen Tiemin 陳鐵民, *Wang Wei ji jiaozhu* 王維集校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 306 ["Xi Shi 西施"]; the Ming dynasty play *Wanshaji* 萬紗記 (Record of Washing Silks) by Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 also describes the relationship between Fan Li and Xi Shi; see Mao Jin 毛晋 (ed.), *Liushizhongqu* 六十種曲 (Beijing: Wenzue guji kanxingchubanshe 1955), 1–161. For a modern novelization; see Nangong Bo 南宮搏, *Xi Shi* 西施 (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chubanshe, 1985).

2 Fan Li was said to have been the author of a work on agriculture entitled *Tao Zhugong shu* 陶朱公術 (Skills of Tao Zhugong), which is quoted extensively in such classic works as the *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 (Essential Arts for the People’s Welfare); see for example Shi Shenghan 石聲漢, *Qimin yaoshu jinshi* 齊民要術今釋 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1958), 368 ["Huai, liu, qiu, zi, wu, zhuo 懸柳楸梓栢柏"], 352 ["Yang niu, ma, lü, luo 養牛馬驢驢"]. He was also said to have been the author of the *Yangyu jing* 養魚經 (Classic on Raising Fish), which again is extensively quoted in the *Qimin yaoshu*; see for example 428 ["Yangyu 養魚"].

3 Fan Li’s twelve principles for getting rich are given in Li Xianjie 李顯傑, Feng Shaoxian 冯曉仙, Li Renrui 李仁瑞, Hou Tongjiang 侯同江, *Shangsheng Fan Li yanjiu* 商聖范蠡研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe, 2005), 45.

4 Fan Li is one of a number of gods of wealth; there seem to have been a variety of regional traditions. In the imperial era, this seems to have developed into a military (*wu*) and a civil (*wen*) tradition. There was a single military god of wealth, Zhao Gongming 趙公明, who was said to have fled from the Qin and become a wealthy metal-worker. There are two civil gods of wealth, Prince Bigan and Fan Li. The choice of the first is very mysterious, and apparently based on his generosity and seliness, rather than any particular connection with financial astuteness. Fan Li’s connection with wealth is more obvious. The civil god of wealth is conventionally depicted in official robes, holding a *rayi*, and with mountains of gold and silver behind him. See Yin Wei 殷偉, Yin Feiran 殷斐然, *Zhongguo minjian sushen* 中國民間俗神 (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2003), 38–44.