CRHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THE TRADITION OF LORD CHUNSHEN

Introduction

Lord Chunshen of Chu, one of the four great lords of the Warring States era, was a figure of great importance in the early history of the city of Suzhou, as can be seen from the prominence accorded to buildings constructed under his auspices in the “Record of the Lands of Wu.” Lord Chunshen and his son, an individual who otherwise went unmentioned in ancient Chinese texts, are said to have gone to great trouble to restore the glory of the former Wu capital. Among other works, they are said to have restored the citadel, though this site was completely destroyed in antiquity, and indeed Lord Chunshen’s reconstruction was itself burned to the ground in the early Qin dynasty.\(^1\) Lord Chunshen seems to have been much admired as the man who had restored the city to a semblance of its pre-conquest importance, and indeed in his concluding remarks at the end of the Shi ji biography of Lord Chunshen, Sima Qian notes the magnificence of the buildings then still to be seen at the site of his former fief.\(^2\) During the imperial era, the works attributed to Lord Chunshen would be much increased, and many further major monuments and projects were said to have been completed under his auspices, including some located a considerable distance away from those recorded as his work in the “Record of the Lands of Wu.”\(^3\) Lord Chunshen of Chu seems to have been remembered affectionately in Suzhou, and he was eventually worshipped there as the city god. Although his cult was suppressed as heterodox during the Tang dynasty, it subsequently recovered.\(^4\)

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1 The history of the citadel, and the uses the land was put to after it was razed to the ground by order of Ming Hongwu, is described in Pan Junming 潘君明, Zicheng: Xiangmo jisuiyue 子城暨陌記載月 (Nanjing: Dongnan daxue, 2004).
2 See Shi ji, 78:2399.
3 See for example Chen Yan'en 陳延渥, Li Zhaoluo 李兆洛, Jiangyinxian zhi 江陰縣志 (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, [1833] 1983), 379.
4 Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700) was responsible for a major inquisition against heterodox cults in the Wu-Yue region following his appointment in 688 as the Pacification
In spite of his contemporary significance as one of the four great lords of the Warring States era, remarkably little is known about Lord Chunshen, and his biography is based upon just a handful of stories. In the case of the *Shiji* biography of Lord Chunshen, it concentrates on two main events: the first being the time when Huang Xie, the future Lord Chunshen, was the chosen companion of Crown Prince Wan of Chu when he was sent as a hostage to the kingdom of Qin. During their time in exile, Huang Xie forged an extremely close friendship with the Crown Prince of Chu, and became closely acquainted with many of the leading political figures in Qin. This would stand him in good stead in 263 BCE, when news reached Qin that the king of Chu was dying. Huang Xie then assisted Crown Prince Wan to escape from Qin and return unannounced to Chu. These events, described in some detail in the *Shiji*, were not without danger for Huang Xie himself, who could easily have faced execution by the irate king of Qin for aiding and abetting his hostage to escape. Having returned safe and sound to Chu, Crown Prince Wan succeeded to the throne as King Kaolie of Chu, the antepenultimate monarch of the kingdom. One of his first acts was to appoint Huang Xie as the new Prime Minister of Chu, and he was given a wide range of other honours by his erstwhile companion in exile. The close relationship between Lord Chunshen of Chu and King Kaolie was never disrupted during their long lives. This was in spite of the scabrous gossip claiming that King Kaolie was not the father of the Crown Prince Han, the future King You of Chu. The mother of Crown Prince Han had been a concubine to Lord Chunshen before being presented to King Kaolie, and according to gossip she was pregnant at the time, making Lord Chunshen the real father of King You of Chu.

The second major event recorded in the standard biography of Lord Chunshen of Chu was his death. According to all accounts except the *Yuejue shu*, Lord Chunshen died in 238 BCE, when he was murdered by assassins sent by Li Yuan, the brother of his former concubine. This is recorded in the story entitled “Chu Kaolie wang wuzi 楚考烈王無子” (King Kaolie of Chu had no children) in the *Zhanguo ce*, also in the *Shiji*

Commissioner (*Xunfushi* 巡撫使) of Jiangnan, during which hundreds of shrines were destroyed. The cult dedicated to Lord Chunshen was one victim of this, indeed only four local cults were exempted: those dedicated to Yu, the Great Earl of Wu, Prince Jizha of Wu, and Wu Zixu. See David McMullen, “The Real Judge Dee: Tzen-chieh and the T’ang Restoration of 705,” *AM* 6.1 (1993): 6–8.