CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE NARRATIVES OF VIRTUE

Introduction

The “Narratives of Virtue” is one of the single most problematic chapters in the entire Yuejue shu. This is due to the highly fragmented nature of the transmitted text. The “Narratives of Virtue” lacks any kind of coherent structure; there seems to be no overarching theme, some sections concern the kingdom of Wu, while others are about the kingdom of Yue, there are also some parts of this chapter which seem to describe the arrangement of the Yuejue shu as a whole. It seems that this chapter is composed from at least nine different source texts, and possibly many more. The description of the various chapters of the transmitted text incorporated into the “Narratives of Virtue” includes a reference to itself, which suggests that this chapter was part of the proto-Yuejue shu dismembered by Yuan Kang and Wu Ping in the Eastern Han dynasty when they were producing their book. This reference reads:

By reading the “Narratives of Virtue”
You can understand the way in which loyal and upright men die
For which they may seem stupid.1

觀乎德叙，
能知忠直所死，
狂憤通拙。

However, this chapter is not mentioned as part of the core text in the “Outer Traditions,” though all the other chapters of the Yuejue shu which figure in the poem in the “Narratives of Virtue” are also referred to there. This means that either the text of the “Outer Traditions” is corrupt and this chapter should have been mentioned there, or that the text quoted above is wrong and the lines about the “Narratives of Virtue” were inserted incorrectly, suggesting that this chapter was part of the core text when in fact this was not the case. Clarification of the status of this

1 Yuejue shu, 103 [“Dexu”].
chapter is particularly important given the problematic nature of the contents. The material incorporated in the “Narratives of Virtue” is contains numerous disparate short pieces of poetry and prose. This perhaps elucidates the nature of this chapter, for it seems to be composed from material related to the rest of the *Yuejue shu* that has been lost from its original context. In fact, the “Narratives of Virtue” seems to be the earliest surviving example of fragment collection in Chinese literature. It remains unclear, however, if these short extracts are lines which have been lost from other chapters of the *Yuejue shu*, or if the “Narratives of Virtue” consists of fragments collected by Yuan Kang and Wu Ping which were then subsequently put together to form this chapter. If the former hypothesis is correct, then this chapter is not part of the original text, and the material concerning the arrangement of the book as a whole would have been lost from either the “Basic Matters” or the “Concluding Remarks” chapters, and so on. If the second hypothesis is correct, then this chapter contains important textual fragments concerned with the history and culture of the ancient kingdoms of Wu and Yue which Yuan Kang and Wu Ping believed to be important enough to merit inclusion in their anthology. In that case this chapter is a significant part of the text as a whole.

This chapter is extremely difficult to date, since it is composed of so many fragments. In the translation that follows, the text is divided into nine main sections. The first section is a short prose passage concerned with King Goujian of Yue’s troubles at Kuaiji, and how his triumphant overcoming of adversity led to him being respected by all his peers. The second section is a poem, only ten lines long, concerned with the figure of Fan Li. The tone of this piece is deeply mystical, and it is unfortunate that the text is corrupt at this point, though some of the missing characters have been reconstructed from the *Wu Yue chunqiu*. The significance of this poem is not at all clear, though it is related to the description of Fan Li found in both the “Stratagems for the Age” and the “Record of Fanbo” chapters. Tiresomely, the end of the poem has become mixed up with an interpolated line of eighteen characters. This line, which probably represents a misplaced bamboo strip intruding into the text, has apparently come from somewhere else in the text, but it is not entirely clear where it should be replaced. I suspect that it was originally part of the story of Fan Li’s exile which is included later on in this chapter, and that is the suggestion given in the translation below. It is likely that since this line is also concerned with the history of Fan Li (though it is prose and not poetry), it was placed here by a bewildered copyist. The intrusive line runs: