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On Morality and Culture:
Lessons from the Kingdom of Wu

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Abstract

Cultural differences between nations can often lead to diplomatic misunderstandings that may spark conflict. In order to better understand another nation, the analyst must study how that nation sees itself, ideally through the stories it tells. This paper covers the theoretical approach to how a society's stories serve as a method of inculcating a value system that serves as a guide to enacting policy, including foreign policy. It then recounts the Chinese legend of King Goujian, and examines how this narrative has contributed to the Chinese worldview, and hence influences policymaking in Beijing. It concludes with an interpretation of what lessons Beijing has learned, and should learn, from the Goujian tale as it pursues its foreign policy objectives into the 21st century.

Keywords: *Chinese foreign policy, culturalist, BRI, myths and legends, moral development*

> The ‘Duke’ of Shê (葉公) addressed Master K’ung (孔子) saying, In my country there was a man called Upright Kung (直躬). His father appropriated a sheep, and Kung bore witness against him. Master K’ung said, In my country the upright men are of quite another sort. A father will screen his son, and a son his father—which incidentally does involve a sort of uprightness.
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> —*The Analects of Confucius* (論語 , Arthur Waley’s translation, 1938), Book XIII: “Tzu-lu” (子路)

1. Introduction

As long ago as 1948, the godfather of American sinology, John King Fairbank, observed that analysts seeking to understand the behaviour and policies of Chinese leaders needed a historical perspective. This was “not a luxury, but a necessity,” Fairbank insisted. Moreover, analysts, negotiators, and policymakers seeking to understand the drive and motivation of any culture different from their own, especially when it comes to policies on security and military matters—matters of life and death—must pursue an understanding of moral reasoning in that culture (Fairbank, 1983; Hwang 1998).

As the quote above illustrates, moral reasoning is very much dependent on what “part of the country” one is from, and thus without understanding the culture of another nation, we are hindered in our ability to effectively engage with that nation for the purposes of negotiation, diplomacy, or trade, to say nothing of preventing war. The following paper begins with a look at the theoretical approach to how stories—the myths, legends, and fairy tales taught to children in a particular society—serve as a vector by which that society’s morality and value system is perpetuated through the generations, and how that value system acts as a lens through which policy is focused. It then goes on to examine a specific case study, that of the Chinese legend of King Goujian (句踐), and how this narrative has contributed to the Chinese worldview, and hence to shaping policy in Beijing. It concludes with an interpretation of what lessons Beijing should learn from the Goujian narrative as it pursues its foreign policy objectives into the 21st century.

2. Narrative: Building Blocks of Culture

Stories are how we learn right from wrong. It is not lists of rules through which morals are transmitted and taught from parent (or, increasingly, teacher) to child; nor is it by example, except insofar as how leading an exemplary life is, in itself, a form of narrative-in-practice. It is through stories that moral education is best performed, as these stories offer the listener role models, ideals to reach for, topics for discussion; and they familiarize the student with examples of good actions and bad actions; with heroes and villains; with rewards and punishments. Moreover, it is through narrative that children learn values, not just of right and wrong, or of good and evil, but of empathy, justice, care, and generosity—whatever values are prized by that culture.

In fact, it is through their importance as a central mechanism for transmitting values that stories can be regarded as the building blocks of culture. Since man first harnessed fire and began banding together in hunting groups, he would use signs, sounds, and rock art to convey his intended meaning: what are we hunting, how shall we hunt it, and what are the risks? Our brains evolved to absorb meaning in this way, as suggested by the popular tricks we still use to memorize groups of random words by creating little mnemonic stories. With the development of language, humans gained control over their memory and hence their emotional responses, and stories became an essential tool not just in instruction, but in entertainment. The injection of an emotional component into storytelling raises the practice to the realm of moral and ethical education (Rahim and Rahiem, 2012).

The culture of the Apache tribes of the United States has a particularly close relationship to narrative. They employ a linguistic practice known as "speaking with names," by which the names that are assigned to places immediately invoke a recall of events known to have transpired there, and therefore an understanding of the message being conveyed by the speaker. Very often, that message is a moral one, not too different from the Western tradition beginning in ancient Greece of telling fables, though the Apache way is far more economical and immediate (Basso 1996).

In much the same way, narrative is how values have been transmitted down through the millennia, and it is where culture resides. Folk tales, perhaps initially told to entertain, evolved to teach about belief systems, disseminate customs and traditions, and to familiarize the next generation with the revered ancestors and heroes of their tribe. They are how we have Odin and Beowulf; Zeus and Hercules; Guanyin and Mulan. Even today, parents tell their children bedtime stories. Schools and libraries have reading-aloud sessions for local kids. More than entertainment, this is how children learn right from wrong, and how to be moral people in their actions and their beliefs. At more advanced levels, the literary canon of a great civilization contains within it that culture's traditional moral values and provides readers with heroes to believe in and emulate. Indeed: narrative is so powerful a method of inculcating values that it is often the front line in battles between competing intracultural ideologies: whoever gets to tell the stories, gets to direct the actions and beliefs of their society. It used to be parents that were charged with this duty, but recognizing its power, the priestly class seized control of the franchise. In totalitarian governments, it is the party that decides what stories get to be told: in capitalist nations, it's often conglomerates like Disney that weave the approved narratives, sometimes packaged with product placement for good measure (Honig 1987; Gerbner, 1994).

For generations, the cultural role of storyteller in the West has been invested with a high degree of power, as evidenced by how ardently that role has been fought over by opposing members of the political divide. The issue of character education rose to prominence in the early 1990s with the publication of William Bennett's *The book of virtues* (1993), in which the author laments what he saw as the capture of several American institutions—including those such as the media and higher education that are primarily concerned with storytelling—by thinkers informed by far-left ideology and nihilism. He called for a reversal of what he perceived as an erosion of traditional values through a renewed focus on the nation's foundational narratives and reverence for stories of virtue populated by moral characters and heroes overcoming ethical conflicts. On the other side of this ideological divide, movements such as "disrupt texts" seek to remove those foundational narratives of the Western canon that they see as reinforcing the patriarchy and contributing to systemic racism, and replace them with a more inclusive and equitable curriculum more in line with the values they wish to inculcate (Narvaez, 2008; Guillory, 2013).

Heroes are especially important in the use of narratives to transmit values. The hero of a story is the character whose choices reflect the mores, customs, and values of the culture, at that point in time. Some heroes reflect their particular eras in history or their nation of origin; others exhibit qualities that are considered to be universal. Very often, heroes bring boons to their community through selflessness and sacrifice. In all cases, heroes invite the listener to follow their example and embrace—morally, individually, and politically—the values and qualities they embody (Sanchez, 1998).

In addition to acting as a vector for the transmission of morality, these stories have the potential to create civilizations. The very definition of European civilization can be found in its grand narrative epics: Stories of heroes and gods, struggle over nature, and emergence from chaos into order. Many of the stories passed down from generation to generation help to define communities, from the tribal level to the civilizational. Communities can only exist, cohere, and function as social entities by virtue of the stories told about them. Traditions, role relations, and institutional systems within a culture take shape as a direct result of the narrative surrounding them. A practice or organization evolves, through its stories, into a cultural institution when the individuals taking part are subsumed into the roles they are inhabiting, allowing the role to take prominence over the individual identity. Thus, individuals voluntarily participating in a culture's narrative roles—whether it be that of "dutiful wife," "protector and provider," or something performative of "filial piety"—is how socialization occurs. Indeed: we learn stories precisely so that we may participate in them (Carr, 1986; Gare, 2001).

Despite the demonstrated power of narrative, storytelling as pedagogy has been strangely denigrated in the Western knowledge traditions. During the enlightenment, the mystical components of systems of knowledge acquisition were stripped away in favour of a dogmatic focus on the rational, forcing knowledge systems that touched upon the spiritual to either go underground, living on only in secret societies and mystery cults, or be transferred to the exclusive purview of organized religion. So it is that Alchemy transmuted into Chemistry, and Astrology into Astronomy. Despite the undeniable benefits of living in a civilization whose motivating epistemology is derived from the enlightenment, man does not live by logic alone, and the spiritual aspect of being has been removed from the accepted mainstream systems of scientific and rational knowledge. It is perhaps for this reason that

Western policymakers and political analysts have such a difficult time understanding and interpreting the policies and actions of non-Western countries like China, preferring instead to lean on safe and reliable heuristics such as political realism, neo-liberalism, or Marxism, without taking culture into account. This is their loss (Pinker, 2018; Gare, 2001; McIntosh, 2012).

The link between morality and storytelling goes back to the pioneer of developmental child psychology, Jean Piaget, most famously in his work on the distinction between expiation and reciprocity as punishment strategies. Following up on Piaget's work, Lawrence Kohlberg likewise used narrative techniques to present moral dilemmas. Kohlberg demonstrated that moral reasoning developed through childhood and on into adulthood following six discrete stages. While stages cannot be skipped—a child cannot proceed from stage two to stage four, for example—subsequent research has shown that students can be guided through the stages at a faster pace using certain pedagogical practices. These practices include storytelling (Narvaez, 2008; Fleming, 2005; Abramson, 1993).

According to Kohlberg, the six stages of moral reasoning—wherein there are two stages in each level—are universal principles that remain constant across all cultures. He sees apparent cross-cultural disparities as mere differences in degree, some groups being at higher stages of moral reasoning than others. Indeed, the concept of ethical relativism, far from being explanatory, is rather itself a sign that the individual espousing it is at a lower stage of moral consciousness: one that is characteristic of being transitional between the second level (or conventional morality) and the third (or principled morality) (Kohlberg, 1981; Vitz, 1990; Christensen, 1982).

Not everyone agrees with this claim of universality, however. Building on Kohlberg's six-stage theory, Ma (1992) offers a Chinese perspective on moral development that is integrated into the existing Kohlbergian framework, but makes a few changes, including the addition of a seventh stage. The first two stages are, in agreement with Kohlberg, perceived as cultural universals: (1) the Obedience and Punishment Orientation, in which the individual does good in order to avoid punishment; and (2) Individualism and Exchange, where an awareness develops that different individuals have different viewpoints. As the individual progresses to higher stages, a more culturally distinct notion of morality becomes apparent, and the higher the stage, the more divergent the cultural influences. Kohlberg's highest stage represented the ideal morality of Christian civilization, which he saw as a universal, justice-based moral code. According to Hwang (1998), however, that code is anything but universal. The Chinese sub-structure identified by Ma (1990) is characterized as having Confucian and Taoist influences. For example, there are two sub-stages making up the final stage, Stage 7: (a) Sainted Altruism, derived from the Buddhist concept of compassion and oriented outward toward the world and society; and (b) Non-Valuative Judgment, which is derived from the work of philosophers Lau Tzu (老子) and Chuang Tzu (莊子), and is more individualistic and transcendent (Hwang, 1998; Ma, 1990).

3. Foundational Myths and Legends

Each culture has foundational tales, and to understand that culture (and more importantly, how that culture sees itself), one has to understand its stories. In America—at least in generations past—it was stories like that of a young George Washington and the cherry tree, which taught the moral imperative to tell the truth. The fable of the ant and the grasshopper likewise entreaties its listener to develop a respect for hard work and planning, as well as generosity and forgiveness. In a larger, national sense, there are stories that serve as the foundational myth for the country. An understanding of America's War of Independence, for example, and the Boston Tea Party that preceded it, are necessary if one is to develop an appreciation for the uniquely American beliefs on issues such as taxation without representation, individual rights, and the importance of having limits on State power. What then are the motivating narratives in today's China that carry a moral component, as well as that serve to unite citizens under a common Chinese identity?

4. The Chinese Dream

China's paramount leader Xi Jinping (习近平) has a vision for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Almost as soon as he came to power in 2012, Xi began speaking about "the Chinese Dream." According to the head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, Liu Qibao, the Chinese Dream is the regime's new "mission statement" and a "political manifesto" for the future of the Party and the country. It is predicated on two dogmas: (1) the "dynastic cycle" political theory on Chinese history, which sees history as cyclical, having alternating periods of national weakness and national strength; and (2) the "century of humiliation." The narrative of China's century of humiliation is the supporting framework for the Chinese Dream. It refers to the period during which China was conquered by Europeans and Japanese, starting with the Opium Wars and ending with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The narrative is almost a blueprint for the manifest destiny of China's impending international greatness, as it emerges from a century of weakness to an historically inevitable position of great power. In China, the purpose of moral education is to benefit the government, not the individual person (Peters, 2017; Economy, 2018; Li, 1990).

The Chinese Dream is more than just a slogan: it serves as a guiding national narrative in today's China. A scholar of public policy, Zheng Wang (2014), uses Johan Galtung's Chosenness-Myths-Trauma (CMT) complex to analyze the civilizational narrative undergirding the Chinese sense of self and to explain the current drive toward national rejuvenation. A cohesive national identity can be built upon one or more major historical events, according to Galtung (2001), and it is necessary to understand this narrative in order to understand how and why that nation responds to situations of conflict. The historical events that are selected as the national foundational narrative fall into the categories of Chosenness, Myths, and Trauma. In the first of these, Chosenness, a population believes it has been chosen, by a god or some other supernatural force. In Myths, the formative story of the nation is mythologized and woven into the fabric of the national identity. Trauma is the final element that imposes a meaning on the narrative of national suffering, promising that the nation will rise above that suffering and ascend to a deserved position of greatness and power. The CMT complex is also known as the collective megalo-paranoia syndrome (Wang, 2014; Galtung, 2001; van der Dennen, 2000).

The narrative that is chosen has the power to create a shared sense of nationhood that gels the nation together: it is a story that parents tell their children; teachers use it to educate their pupils; and the government uses it to build patriotism, through propaganda and popular media. Whether or not the story has a basis in fact is immaterial: according to Benedict Anderson (2006), even a fictitious narrative can contribute to building an "imagined community" that helps a population become a nation. Although there may be historical or cultural factors standing in the way of nation-building, leaders can surmount this difficulty with the power of narrative. In Anderson's words, the nation is "imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” In other words, one American, for example, may never personally meet all the other hundreds of millions of Americans, but still they form a community. And any American he does meet will share cultural similarities, and hence share an identity, even though they may be different races, different religions, and live in different communities thousands of miles apart. Despite these seemingly foundational differences, they will nevertheless share an identity by virtue of their common membership in their imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Galtung, 2001).

Through the mechanism of Galtung’s CMT complex—and given the Chinese cyclical view of history and thus the inevitability of China’s imminent greatness—Xi’s Chinese Dream narrative has fuelled nationalistic sentiments throughout China and armed his country with a sense of civilizational confidence, the type of which long ago died out in Europe, and is even now waning in America.

5. New *Tianxia*-ism

Wang describes the Chinese belief of political sovereignty over the Earth being invested in the Emperor by universal metaphysical principles of order, especially the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven”: the imperial court sits in the Earthly realm at the center of this cosmology, and its structure mirrors that of heaven. Likewise, international hegemonic authority is centred on the Middle Kingdom, from whence it flows out to the provinces and eventually to the lands of the barbarians. This *Tianxia* (天下, “all-under-heaven”) system aids in the creation of nationalism and has become a deep-rooted aspect of the Chinese collective unconscious—it forms the backbone of New *Tianxia*-ism, which is a popular international relations (IR) theory that is currently *de rigueur* among policy circles in Beijing, influencing how policymakers view China's rightful place in the regional and international community. Politicians and analysts in Beijing who subscribe to this theory promote it as a profoundly superior foundation upon which to restructure the international order (Wang, 2014; Chu, 2020).

The recent popularity of New *Tianxia*-ism in the halls of power and academia in China makes sense when viewed from a culturalist perspective: The alternating periods of totalitarian order and war-fuelled turmoil that make up Chinese history illustrate a fear of chaos and an attempt to eliminate it through the imposition of strong, central order. The highest aspiration of any governance structure must be the establishment of a harmonious and prosperous society, which alone can disrupt the chaotic cycle of disorder, conflict, poverty, and death (Dorn, 2006).

This anxiety over chaos can be observed domestically as well as in the realm of foreign affairs. At home, the ruling class in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rejects the universal Western values of human rights and democracy for its people, because such freedoms are inherently (and by definition) impossible to control, leading to a situation of domestic chaos in which everyone would decide for themselves what to say, what to believe, and whom to associate with. This anxiety is evidenced by the ubiquity of the Chinese Social Credit system, which allows the Party to control virtually every aspect of the private life of every Chinese citizen. Fear of chaos extends to the international sphere as well, where the norm of state sovereignty and international anarchy that characterize the Westphalian system currently holds sway. Hence the PRC's attempts to exert control over the operation of supranational bodies such as the World Health Organization, the UN International Telecommunications Union, the International Civil Aviation Organization, Interpol, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and many other institutions that exert an enormous, if not widely acknowledged, authority over global affairs (Brands, 2020; Karalekas, 2018; Chu, 2020).

The Chinese tributary system represented order and a strict hierarchy in Asia-Pacific relations, and hence New *Tianxia*-ism—which essentially seeks to recreate that regional order—is designed to serve as an antidote to the chaos that currently defines the international system built on state sovereignty. In the tributary system, the nominally autonomous and independent states surrounding Imperial China would formally acknowledge the superiority of the Chinese and give over suzerainty to Peking. It was an effort to achieve the Confucian world order, wherein the Emperor would authorize a foreign leader's investiture by conferring an official seal or formal robes of office, or even crowning a king, in these neighbouring territories. In exchange for these states' fealty and tribute, Peking would desist from annexing or otherwise harassing the peripheral nations using its great economic and military might (Chu, 2020; Stuart-Fox, 2003).

The tributary system was so successful and profitable for the Empire that attempts were made to expand it outward, beyond even the Asia-Pacific region. The most famous of these attempts was perhaps the storied 15th-century voyages of Admiral Zheng He (鄭和). Every schoolchild knows the story of Zheng He, as it has long been used to foster civilizational pride in the manner described above of creating Anderson's (2006) "imagined community:" A famous seaman, intrepid adventurer, and cunning diplomat, Zheng He and his voyage of exploration were more than a cracking bedtime story: they represented the greatness and benevolence of a powerful and confident China, in which all Chinese could partake and take pride. As with so many such tales, the truth is somewhat less glorious. The Admiral's famous fleet of huge treasure ships were closer to black ships than they were to vessels of exploration: his mission was to expand the Empire by extracting tribute from the nations he encountered, using the firepower of his armada and the sheer number of troops it carried to intimidate the leaders and peoples of the small nations they discovered on the periphery of their Empire. The mission was a resounding success, adding over 30 new tributary states, suppressing piracy against imperial trade, and exerting force against any of China's neighbours who disrespected the Ming Emperor or otherwise failed to pay tribute. Seen in this light, Zheng He was less an explorer and more an agent of the Chinese court, engaged in maritime proto-colonialism and seeking to impose a *pax Ming* in the region (French, 2017; Chia and Church, 2012; Wade, 2005).

Which is not to say that colonialist efforts of this sort are without positive outcomes: the Chinese Tributary System—which became formalized in the early years of the Ming dynasty—did manage to keep the peace in the Asia Pacific region. It is therefore not surprising that a system of regional order that has a well-established precedent of maintaining harmony and minimizing chaos should be attractive to PRC government planners today, especially when such a system would put the power to control regional trade and security squarely in Beijing's hands (Lee, 2016; Friend and Thayer, 2017).

While the story of Admiral Zheng He, touched upon above, illustrates well the power of narrative to convey moral teachings and to foment feelings of community and nationalism, one that has more direct parallels with how modern-day Beijing conducts statecraft is the tale of King Goujian.

6. The Story of King Goujian of Yue

China operated on a feudal system during the time known as the Spring and Autumn period (771 to 476 BC). The monarchs of the Zhou (周) dynasty ruled over a small area compared to the size of China today, and from their capital in today’s Luoyang, they granted lands to hundreds of hereditary noblemen in the form of fiefdoms. In 492 BC, once such fiefdom—the state of Yue (越), roughly where modern-day Zhejiang is located—was ruled by King Goujian. Goujian was young and inexperienced, having just ascended to the throne after the recent death of his father. Indeed, before even the mourning period had come to an end, Yue was attacked by their old enemy to the north: the Kingdom of Wu (吳).

Despite his inexperience and unpreparedness, Goujian succeeded in defending his kingdom, and in the ensuing battle, King Helü (闔閭) of Wu was mortally wounded and died while in retreat. Leadership of Wu fell to the king’s son, Fuchai (夫差), and after being crowned king of Wu, Fuchai lost no time in seeking revenge for the death of his father. He set to rebuilding and modernizing his army, and after two years of preparations, Fuchai launched a punishing attack on Yue. Unable to repel the attacking forces, Goujian dispatched one of his ministers, Wen Zhong (文種), to sue for peace.

Fuchai’s revenge was complete. The harsh terms of surrender that he imposed on Goujian included that King Goujian himself, along with his wife and his top military strategist, Fan Li (范蠡), would be taken prisoner and used as slave labour in Wu. In his absence, Wen Zhong would administer the kingdom of Yue as a vassal state of Wu.

Specifically, Goujian and his entourage were put to work toiling in King Fuchai’s royal stables, doing dirty and degrading work where even the peasants could look down upon them. Fuchai would often take the opportunity to ride past, just to taunt his defeated foe. Truly, Goujian's humiliation was total.

To Fuchai's astonishment, however, Goujian and his retinue consistently performed their tasks efficiently and with total equanimity, even when they did not know that they were being observed. Never once did they utter a word of complaint; nor, it is said, could even a sigh of despondency be heard emanating from their lodgings at night.

This, coupled with Wen Zhong's proficient management of Yue as an exemplary vassal state subservient to Wu, earned Fuchai's respect. After three years of captivity and toil, Fuchai agreed to release his hostages, on the condition that Yue would continue to be administered as a tributary state. Goujian agreed.

Goujian was as good as his word. Under his leadership, Yue proved to be the most loyal of any of Wu's vassal states: In any financial or trade matters, Wu got the better end of the deal; The best of Yue's crops were sold to Wu at bargain-basement prices, until eventually, Yue became Wu's breadbasket. The most adept Yue craftsmen were dispatched to Wu, along with the finest lumber, to build elaborate palaces for the king and his noblemen, who spent their fortunes accumulating the trappings of wealth. Most importantly, the most beautiful women from throughout Yue were meticulously trained in etiquette and dance, and sent to Wu to serve as concubines.

The most famous of these concubines was Xi Shi (西施), known by Chinese historians as one of the Four Great Beauties of China. Goujian's minister, Fan Li, discovered Xi Shi himself; a simple peasant girl with little formal education who was washing clothes by the river. Taken by her great beauty, Fan Li taught her manners, music, and the skills of a courtesan, and then dispatched her to Wu to become the concubine of King Fuchai himself.

Fuchai immediately became love-struck, and did everything in his power to please Xi Shi. He paid enormous sums building her beautiful towers and lavish palaces, spending his treasury to buy Yue timber and hire Yue craftsmen. Fuchai and his noblemen began to enjoy this period of luxury and debt-spending, enjoying their lifestyle and spending less and less time on matters of state.

This gradual slide into dependency and decadence happened so gradually that it went entirely unnoticed by everyone except for Fuchai's top minister, Wu Zixu (伍子胥). As a man of advanced age and experience, Wu Zixu was immune to the charms of the beauties of Yue, and his was the only voice of caution against the unwise decisions that Fuchai was making. Wu Zixu warned his king against doing too much business with Yue and accepting its gifts, but Fuchai dismissed his concerns, believing that Yue had been completely subdued. Eventually, the profligate king became so frustrated with Wu Zixu's remonstrations that he ordered the old man to take his own life.

While the noblemen of Wu grew softer, king Goujian and the state of Yue grew tougher. Rather than live in royal luxury, Goujian slept on a bed of brushwood—in some tellings, he lived in a barn rather than a palace. He kept the gall bladder of a snake hanging in his sleeping quarters, and he would lick it each morning upon awakening, the bilious taste a daily reminder of his humiliation at the hands of Wu and an admonition to never lose focus on his quest for revenge. Every decision he made was designed—after meticulous planning with the military strategist *par excellence* Fan Li—to slowly weaken his foe: the concubines; the craftsmen; the sweetheart deals in trade and exchange.

Another stratagem that illustrates well this trade relationship involves Goujian's plan to purchase grain from Wu. Yue claimed to have suffered a crop failure, and Fuchai agreed to lend the kingdom 10,000 *dan* of grain under the terms that it be paid back when Yue has a bumper harvest. The following year, Goujian ordered that 10,000 *dan* of the best seeds of grain be boiled, and then shipped to Wu as repayment. In this condition, it could be eaten, but would bear no crop, so the reliance on Yue grain precipitated a famine in Wu, further weakening the Wu state and making it ripe for conquest (Cohen, 2008).

While the tale focuses on the measures Goujian employed in order to transform his state into one that was primed for revenge against a larger foe, it is worth noting that these measures had, perhaps as a side effect, a positive impact on life for the people of Yue. Goujian improved morale throughout the kingdom and ingratiated himself to the people by living a Spartan life, free of the usual kingly ostentation: he only ate food that he had grown, and wore only clothes that his wife had sewn. He took full responsibility and apologized for his defeat at the hands of Wu, and promised to make reparations. He became a part of the people's lives, personally offering condolences in times of tragedy, and congratulations on happier occasions.

Yue's troops were trained by the most skilled martial artists that Goujian could assemble for the task, including the famed archer Chen Yin (陳音), and the great swordswoman who came to be known as the Maiden of Yue (*Yuenü*, 越女). In terms of policy, he offered medical care to expectant mothers, mandated age restrictions on couples seeking marriage so that the population would grow, and even offered childcare under certain circumstances. He offered tax relief and reduced the forced labour obligations on peasant families who had lost sons, and established provisions for the care of orphans. Goujian's administrative record was so successful that the people of his kingdom were prosperous and happy, and very much enamoured of their king. Thus when it came time to exact his revenge, there would be little doubt that they would enthusiastically follow him into battle.

Acting as a spy in her new household, Xi Shi had been sending regular reports to her handler in Yue, Fan Li, who in turn counselled Goujian on the appropriate time to strike. After many years of pretending to be a loyal partner to Wu, Goujian had managed to enrich his kingdom and raise a great army. He had also managed to make Wu weak, decadent, and economically dependent on Yue's largesse, and therefore ripe for defeat. Finally, in 482 BC, Fan Li determined that conditions were right, and it was time to attack. Confident of his superiority, Goujian marched north with 50,000 troops and easily conquered Wu (Timm, 2015; Daniels, 2013; Cohen, 2008).

7. Lessons from History

Few Westerners have heard the story of King Goujian, and even among academics, it is considered relevant primarily to those working in fields such as Chinese literature and folklore. As a result, analysts and policymakers working in Washington and Brussels very often fail to see how influential to the culture, and hence the strategic planning process, such stories can be in Beijing, preferring instead to lean on the well-worn tools of their craft, such as game theory and the rational choice paradigm. But as discussed in the first part of this paper, such tales are the building blocks of morality, and contribute to the worldview of the nation in which they are told, to create an imagined community, and hence a nation.

Every school child in China knows the tale of the king who slept on brushwood and tasted gall each morning: it is an artefact of cultural knowledge; a common language among all the people of China, as recognizable as "speaking with names" is to an Apache. Mere mention of the name Goujian conjures the concept of *taoguang yanghui* (韜光養晦) popularized by Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平): biding one's time, hiding one's strengths, and feigning subservience while manipulating conditions until one's enemy is weak and one's own position is strong: strong enough to emerge victorious when the time is finally right to show one's true colours and strike (Cohen, 2008).

The story has direct relevance to understanding Beijing policy today. It has been referenced widely by Chinese sociologists and analysts of international relations as they sought to characterize and direct China's rise (see Xing and Zhang, 2006; Yan, 2011; Luan, 2017). It has also made its way onto the radar of a few Western China hands (see Connolly and Gottwald, 2013; Carr, 2010). Despite the story's prevalence in Chinese IR studies, the attention that it garners from international scholars, and the extrapolation of its lessons by outsiders seeking to understand the strategy of the CCP, has been met with criticism from Chinese commentators, as well as a few outside of China, who prefer to focus on the more benign lessons imparted by the tale: that rather than revenge, the real takeaway from Goujian's example should be the values of dedication, perseverance, and sacrifice (see Liu, 2014; Cohen, 2008).

Those who draw parallels between Goujian's strategy and that of today's CCP have much to work with. In his controversial book, *The hundred-year marathon*, director of the Center on Chinese Strategy at the Hudson Institute Michael Pillsbury (2015) writes at length on this topic, including relaying the details of his debriefing of a PRC defector who describes how a hardline faction of Chinese leaders known as *Ying Pai* (鷹派, "Hawks" or "Eagles") are seeking to use King Goujian's defeat of Wu as a blueprint for dealing with America, and that convincing the West that China's intentions are benign is merely part of the plan (Pillsbury, 2015: 118).

8. Beating Ploughshares into Swords

Far from merely serving as the world's factory, Chinese planners have worked hard to successfully transform their country into a key player in a number of strategically important industries, and over the years it has turned itself into the world's largest supplier of several crucial commodities, becoming the world's largest exporter of goods in 2009, and accounting for a significant percentage of world trade in natural resources such as aluminum, coal, copper, and iron ore, to name a few. Beijing likewise set its sights on achieving dominance of the rare earth metals market. These 17 minerals are essential components in the production of nearly everything electronic, from smartphones to weapons systems, and as such, the uninterrupted importation of rare earths into countries such as Japan and the United States is vital to maintaining industrial production flow in those countries' electronics industries. Over the past two decades, China has leveraged its cheap, abundant manual labour and lack of strong environmental protection legislation, as well as issuing export tax rebates, to offer rare earth metals to buyers at much lower prices than any foreign competitor. Over time, it has succeeded in cornering the market on these strategically important minerals, and slowing the extraction and production operations of its foreign competitors down to a trickle. As a result, China is now the largest supplier of rare earth metals on the world market (Pines, 2020; China Power team, 17th July 2020).

Moreover, since the slowdown in global trade due to the COVID-19 lookdowns in most of the world, China has been stockpiling a number of commodities at an alarming rate, buying up whatever it can from all over the world, according to a conference organised by the Association of Bulk Terminal Operators. Clearly, policymakers in Beijing see the control of such commodities as more than just a moneymaking opportunity. This was illustrated in the fallout after an incident that occurred on September 7, 2010, when a Chinese fishing trawler intentionally rammed two Japanese Coast Guard patrol ships in waters near the Senkaku / 尖閣 (Diaoyu / 釣魚 in Chinese) Islands, which is claimed as sovereign territory by both sides. The captain was taken into Japanese custody, and the Chinese leadership employed a host of methods to pressure the Japanese for his release. For example, the government issued repeated summonses to the Japanese ambassador—at one point, in the middle of the night—to express anger over the incident. The Chinese government postponed high-level bilateral meetings with Japanese officials, as well as cancelling cultural exchanges between the two countries. China's reaction went even further, with the arrest of four Japanese nationals, ostensibly for trespassing into a Chinese military zone; and either tacitly or implicitly fomenting anti-Japanese sentiment among the population by giving authorization for anti-Japanese street protests. Most tellingly, however, Beijing blocked the export of rare earth metals to Japan, which dealt a blow to Tokyo's signature electronics industry. Faced with this onslaught, the relatively inexperienced administration of then-Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan (菅直人) blinked, released the Chinese captain, and handed the win to China. While the impact on Japan's supply chains was not irreparable, the move highlighted Tokyo's reliance on China for more than 80 percent of its rare earth imports. It also revealed Beijing's willingness to beat the ploughshares of trade into the swords of war (*Freight News*, 5th November 2020; Karalekas, 2018; *Japan Probe*, 22nd September 2010; China Power team, 17th July 2020).

This was not an isolated incident, and China's bullying is also not limited to import restrictions. In fact, China has leveraged its economic clout in coercion efforts against European and North American entities a reported 60 times since the year 2000, as recorded by the Alliance for

Securing Democracy's Authoritarian Interference Tracker. Examples include cancelling lucrative broadcasts of US National Basketball Association (NBA) games in retaliation for a pro-Hong Kong tweet by the general manager of an NBA team. Beijing threatened Germany's automakers when Berlin began mulling security standards that would have ruled out Huawei's access to that country's 5G telecommunications project. Moreover, after the Vancouver arrest of Huawei's CFO Meng Wanzhou on charges of bank and wire fraud surrounding violations of trade sanctions on Iran, Beijing attacked Canada's tourism industry, to say nothing of the imprisonment of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig on spurious charges in what essentially amounts to a tit-for-tat game of "hostage diplomacy" (Gorman, 2021).

Moreover, like Goujian's famous stratagem, the PRC's rise to power has largely been successful due to a judicious degree of duplicity. Those who doubt this assessment would do well to remember the stated reason for the PRC's June 2000 purchase of the decommissioned Soviet Navy aircraft carrier *Varyag*: to convert the warship into a floating hotel and casino. It was not long before this falsehood was abandoned, and in 2012, the retrofitted warship was commissioned into the People's Liberation Army Navy as a fully functional aircraft carrier, now named the *Liaoning*.

Like the floating casino cover story, the phrase "peaceful rise," now long abandoned, was once commonly used to reassure nervous observers in the West who were startled by the rapidity of China's economic and military growth. It was so successful that for decades, the world actively contributed to China's rise, in the hopes that China's adoption of State capitalism, which lifted half a billion people out of poverty, would eventually lead to social liberalization as well. It was this trajectory that encouraged corporations and governments in the West to hitch their wagons to the Chinese star just as the era of globalization was gaining traction: not only would they improve the lives of their own citizens via the provision of cheap made-in-China products, but they would make enormous profits in so doing. Best of all, their consciences would be clear because, as they were promised by IR and development theorists, this interaction would be contributing to the social emancipation of the Chinese people. The precedents set in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and innumerable other countries were offered as proof of this inevitability (McGregor, 2012; Coase and Wang, 2016).

Only this highly anticipated social liberalization never materialized. Even as the benefits of doing business with China began to pay fewer and fewer dividends, policymakers and corporations were reticent to stop throwing good money after bad, even to the point of turning a blind eye to the rampant theft of intellectual property worth hundreds of billions of dollars per year. Those analysts who clung to visions of a democratic China were dealt a blow when, in 2012, Xi Jinping ascended to the concurrent posts of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and a new revanchist era of leadership began in Beijing not seen since the days of the personality cult of Mao Zedong (毛澤東). Indeed, in 2018, Xi removed the term limits that formerly constrained his office, effectively declaring himself paramount leader for life. He chose as his animating vision for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation the Chinese Dream concept, which relies heavily on the narrative of the "century of humiliation" that so neatly serves as the "trauma" component of Galtung's Chosenness-Myths-Trauma complex (Hannas *et al.*, 2013; Galtung, 2001).

9. The BRI and Lessons from Goujian

There seem to be many parallels between the tale of King Goujian and the path taken by today's China to wealth and power—too many to dismiss as mere coincidence. That is not to say that, as suggested by Pillsbury (2015), it is an intentional long-term stratagem: it may be the result of the ubiquity of the Goujian story and how it has come to define the Chinese experience and worldview. Either way, Chinese leaders, if they see themselves in the role of Goujian and the West as Wu, are making a potentially dire miscalculation.

The real lesson to be learned from the tale is that leaders must be conscious to avoid creating bitterness among neighboring states and powers dismissively viewed as weak. From this (admittedly unconventional) perspective, the PRC is playing the role of King Fuchai of Wu, establishing tributaries and extracting concessions for China's aggrandizement with little thought to the long-term consequences of creating the conditions for deep resentment against China. This is largely being achieved through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Formerly known as the One Belt, One Road project, China's BRI was unveiled by Xi in 2013, who touted the endeavor in speeches made during state visits to Indonesia and Kazakhstan. According to official Chinese government figures, in January 2021, the number of countries that have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) related to the BRI reached a staggering 140. One of the most ambitious projects ever launched, the BRI is aimed at constructing an expansive web of global economic, political, and cultural networks, with China at its hub. The vision consists of two interconnected and complementary channels: the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Economic Belt will consist of a networked system of road and railway links, power grids, and petroleum pipelines connecting China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and as far as Europe. Likewise, the new

Maritime Silk Road will emulate its historical namesake and link China with Europe through a system of ports, reclaimed islands, and various other forms of maritime infrastructure throughout the South China Sea, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. The project is so central to Beijing's plans for economic development and foreign relations that it was incorporated into the PRC Constitution in 2017 (Pacheco Pardo, 2018; State Council, PRC, 2015).

The sheer magnitude of the enterprise puts the lie to claims that the BRI is merely an economic undertaking. Analysts and commentators perceive the BRI as the mechanism by which the CCP seeks to ultimately replace US hegemony with the PRC vision of New *Tianxia*-ism. Using a Western perspective to explain it, the project's aim appears to be to erect a transnational, inter-regional division of labour along the lines described by Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, in which the globe may be divided into core countries, semi-periphery countries, and periphery countries. Highly skilled labour and capital-intensive production are performed in the core countries, whereas the periphery and semi-periphery countries are relegated to providing raw materials and performing low skilled labour, thereby reinforcing the economic dominance of the core countries over those on the periphery. The parallel with the story of King Goujian is clearly discernable, with the Kingdom of Wu receiving the best agricultural produce, the best lumber, the best craftsmen, and even the best courtesans from Yue (Barfield, 1998; Lechner, 2001; Cohen, 2008).

There have been criticisms that the project—whether by design or not—is enticing smaller, poorer countries into debt traps, and that Beijing leverages its largesse in funding infrastructure projects in exchange for concessions to aid in the CCP's strategic positioning both globally and—in the case of its String of Pearls strategy to encircle India—regionally. Examples include the People's Liberation Army

(PLA) Support Base in Djibouti, the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Beijing's expanding influence in Pakistan. In Africa alone, the scale of the debt already owed to China cannot be precisely known, and may be much higher than current estimates according to one recent study, largely because the PRC does not report on its international lending, and "Chinese loans literally fall through the cracks of traditional data-gathering institutions" (Horn *et al.*, 2020). While Western observers are generally unaware of the story of King Goujian, most are familiar with the *Odyssey* by Homer, and characterizations of the BRI as a "Trojan Horse" abound (Richet, 2019; Pieper, 2021).

The risk to China, therefore, is that Beijing may be unwittingly playing the part of the Kingdom of Wu in this analogy, though it clearly prefers to see itself as Yue. The BRI is a long-term megaproject, and it will be years, if not decades, before economists and sociologists are able to parse its outcomes. The risk, at least according to this analysis, is that Beijing may be imposing the conditions on debtor countries that cause their peoples to sleep on brushwood and taste gall, and harbour resentment and a long-simmering desire for revenge—revenge against China.

Note

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