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Mirror, Death, and Rhetoric: Reading Later Han Chinese Bronze Artifacts

Eugene Yuejin Wang



1 *Jian* (looking/mirror), stages of development of ancient ideograph (adapted from *Zhongwen dazidian* [Encyclopedic dictionary of the Chinese language], Taipei, 1982, vi, 9853)

History as Mirror: Trope and Artifact

The idea of the mirror was registered on oracle bones and bronzes in ancient China. The ideograph consists of a human figure bending over a container filled with water (Fig. 1). Thus the word “mirror” (*jian*) from its very beginning involved both “reflection” and the act of “looking into.”¹ It was seized upon as a moral trope. The *Book of Historical Documents*, for instance, contains an “Announcement about Drunkenness” made by King Wu of the Western Zhou dynasty (11th century–770 B.C.) in an address to his princes, which moralizes the ups and downs of the Shang dynasty (16th–11th century B.C.). The founding fathers of the Shang dynasty were said to have “eschewed indulgence in spirits” and attended to their responsibilities as sovereigns with reverence. In contrast, the last successor to those sage rulers abandoned himself to lewdness, dissipation, and drunken excesses. As a result, “Heaven sent down ruin on Yin.” This rhetorical narration of Shang history ends with an exhortation:

Oh, Feng, I have no pleasure in making you this long announcement; but the ancients have said, “Let not men look only into water; let them look into the mirror of other

people. Now that Yin has lost its appointment, ought we not to look much to it as our mirror, and learn how to secure the repose of our time?”²

This earliest moral trope built upon the mirror did not go unheeded. Citing *Shi jing* (The poetry), Mencius (ca. 372–289 B.C.) warned that “the Mirror of Yin is not remote” and reiterated the ancient homily about “looking into the Mirror of Yin.”³ The mirror metaphor thus evolved into a pattern of moralizing historiography or historicizing homily. It harnessed a central trope: history as a mirror. This trope was to endure for more than two millennia.

The evolution of the trope runs almost parallel with what inspired it: the actual bronze mirror. When Mencius evoked “the Mirror of Yin [Shang] . . . not remote,” he was being rhetorical. Yet there did exist bronze mirrors during the Shang period, as archaeologists today have confirmed.⁴ In fact, the earliest bronze mirrors date further back to the Qijia Culture of four millennia ago,⁵ though the earliest use of a bronze mirror recorded in ancient texts dates from 673 B.C.⁶ About thirty mirrors have been excavated which date from the period spanning the Qijia Culture through the Western Zhou period (11th century–770 B.C.). Presumably they were

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1. The character entails a pair of homonyms/homographs: (1) *jian* 鑒, which means, among other things, “mirror” and (2) *jian* 鑒, which means, among other things, “looking” and “viewing.” In ancient texts, they are often interchangeable in both senses of “mirror” and “viewing.” See M. R. Guo, “Sanmenxia chutu tongqi ersanshi” (A few

notes on the bronzes excavated from Sanmenxia), *Wenwu*, no. 1, 1959, 13–15, though at that time Guo categorically dismissed the possibility of the existence of bronze mirrors in the Yin Shang period (14), an assertion soon proved to be wrong by subsequent archaeological discoveries. For a good survey on the cultural significance of early Chinese mirrors, see A. R. Hall, “The Early Significance of Chinese Mirrors,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LX, no. 2, 1935, 182–89. Archaeological discoveries since the publication of Hall’s study have made it necessary to update his materials and modify his assertions.

2. W. L. Qu, *Shangshu jizhu* (Annotated book of historical documents), Taipei, 1983; trans. based on J. Legge, *Chinese Classics*: III. *Shoo King*, Oxford, 1871, 409–10.

3. Jiao Xun, *Mengzi zhengyi* (Annotated Mencius), in *ZZJC*, I, 7:289, 4:173.

4. Five Shang bronze mirrors in all have been excavated. See Q. X. Gao, “Yindai de yimian

tongjing jiqi xiangguan de wenti” (A bronze mirror from the Yin Shang dynasty and its related problems), *Journal of the Institute of History and Language, Academy Sinica*, xxix, 2, 1958, 689–90, fig. 2, pl. 2; Institute of Archaeology, China Social Science Academy, “Anyang yinxu wuhaomu de fajue” (Excavation of tomb no. 5 of the Yin site at Anyang), *Kaogu xuebao*, no. 2, 1977, 72.

5. Between 1975 and 1977, Chinese archaeologists excavated two bronze mirrors at Qijiaping in Guanghe, Gansu Province, and Gamadai in Guinan, Qinhai. They prove that bronze mirrors existed in the Qijia Culture of two millennia B.C. See X. H. You, “Zhongguo zaoqi tongjing ziliao” (Materials concerning early Chinese bronze mirrors), *Kaogu yu wenwu*, no. 3, 1982, 40–41.

6. “A queen’s large girdle with a mirror in it” is recorded in *Zuo zhuan* (Zuoqiu’s commentary to the Spring and Autumn annals), trans. Legge (as in n. 2), v, *The Ch’un Ts’ew with the Tso Chuan*, 101.



2 Ink rubbing of stone carving from the Wu Liang Shrine, *Story of Liang Gaoxing* (detail), ca. A.D. 151, Shandong (from E. Chavannes, *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale*, Paris, 1913, II, pl. 46, no. 77)

then precious rarities. Curiously, under the Eastern Zhou (770–221 B.C.), especially during the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.), when bronzes in general were declining, bronze mirrors multiplied. More than a thousand bronze mirrors from this period have been unearthed. The basic pattern of mirror design had taken shape.⁷

The Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) saw the mass production of bronze mirrors. Nearly all the excavated Later Han (A.D. 25–220) tombs have bronze mirrors in them.⁸ It was also under the Han that the mirror trope as a moralizing Confucian conceit gained a wide discursive currency as Confucian ethics were institutionalized. A pictorial illustration of such a moral trope appears in the Wu Liang Shrine featuring, among other things, a virtuous widow who, while holding a mirror, cuts off her nose to rebuff her suitors and to keep her commitment to her dead husband intact (Fig. 2).⁹ The mirror she holds is a metaphorical ploy. As an exemplary Virtue from history, she *is* the mirror herself. A question then arises: did the actual Han bronze mirrors take cues from such rhetorical tropes? Not in general. While Han classical authors constantly moralize about mirrors in their discourse, the design of Han bronze mirrors seems to fall

short of a full response to such a rhetoric. A look at the designs on the backs of the mirrors testifies to this point.

Han mirrors have a polished reflecting side with their white-bronze composition of copper, tin, and lead; the nonreflecting backs are decorated with intricate designs oriented around a central fluted loop or a perforated hemispherical boss through which a cord may be fastened to be held in the hand (Fig. 3).¹⁰ The ornamental design on the Han mirror changed in keeping with fluctuating tastes.¹¹ In general, it evolved from an abstract decoration to a mimetic representation, from a more regulated symbolic order to a rollicking riot of immortals. It became increasingly saturated with an overall Later Han ethos: the collective yearning for immortality and the fantasy about the paradise presided over by the Queen Mother of the West.¹² This felicitous mood allowed little room for the history-as-mirror kind of sober moralizing. The rhapsodic singing of “the immortals above who know no mortality” frequently inscribed on the mirror made any earthly care trivial.¹³ The Han pictorial mirrors seem in general to have created a universe separate from the moral cosmos.

There are, however, several mirrors with a surprisingly sinister overtone of *danse macabre* (Figs. 4–7). On their backs is a pictorial narrative in four scenes, alluding to a historical episode involving two southern states: Wu and Yue in the lower Yangzi River region during the Spring and Autumn period (770–475 B.C.). Two figures identified as Gou Jian, king of Yue, and Fan Li, his minister, are plotting a scheme against the kingdom of Wu, the powerful neighboring state; two women are sent as bribes to seduce the king of Wu; the king of Wu is complacently screened off on his throne and rejects his loyal minister’s advice against the scheme; the minister, named Wu Zixu (d. 484), is ordered to commit suicide, whereupon he cries out: “Gouge out my eyes and hang them over the gate-tower of Wu, I would like to see the Yue army storming the capital of Wu” (*SJ*, 66:2180).

Here is a mirror decoration that goes against the grain of mirror design. Even Umehara, the most rigorous Japanese scholar of bronze mirrors, finds himself wondering about its *kyumi* (meaning).¹⁴ The mirror features a suicide rather than immortality. It pronounces death and no hereafter. Moreover, representing a historical episode that had happened centuries earlier, it materializes the history-as-mirror trope. And the history to the Han eye has a moral: dissipation

7. Kong and Liu, 21–55.

8. *Ibid.*, 105–6.

9. Wu, 253–54.

10. P. F. Chen, *Shanghai bowuguan cang qing-tongjing* (Bronze mirrors in the Shanghai Museum collection), Shanghai, 1987, 13–16.

11. The early Former Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 24) mirror design typically features an arabesque of abstracted “intertwining serpents” coiled over a ground pattern. Under Emperor Wu’s reign (140–87 B.C.) around the mid-Former Han, the so-called “grass-leaf” pattern appeared, followed by the “star-cloud” pattern (also called the “hundred-nipples” pattern), which may have evolved from the “intertwining serpents,” but with the ground pattern eliminated. The late Former Han mirror design was simplified into more regulated decorative patterns while inscriptions became more pronounced. The so-called TLV mirror design appeared around the Wang Mang interregnum (A.D. 8–23); in ab-

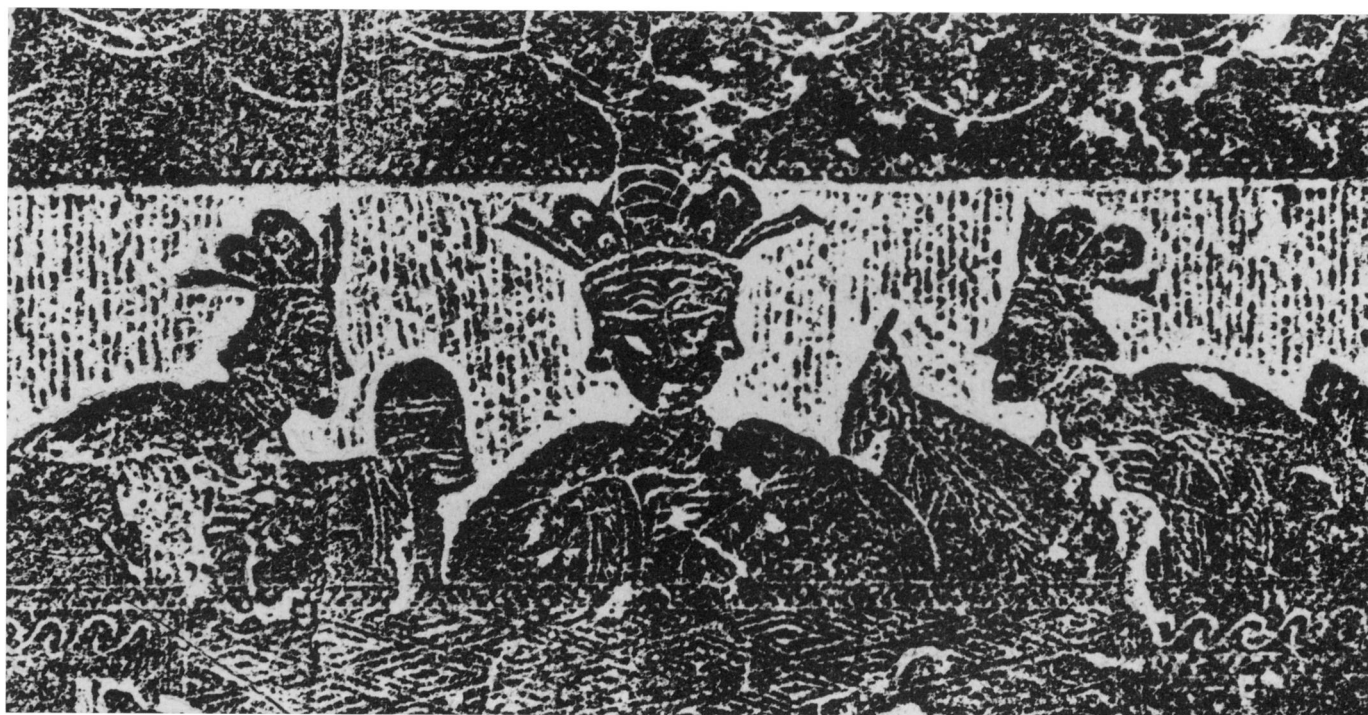
stract design it either alludes to the cosmos or ritual architectural plans, or constitutes a symbolic map of the correlative cosmology structured in terms of Yin/Yang and Five Phases. The mid-Later Han mirror designs started to feature images of immortals, deities, animals, and horses and carriages. The highly regulated patterns and abstract design of the earlier mirrors now gave way to more mimetically representational images. This crop of late Han mirrors, termed the “pictorial mirrors,” is what concerns me here. The above sketch of the stylistic evolution of decorative patterns on Han bronze mirrors is based on Z. S. Wang, *Han Civilization*, trans. K. C. Chang et al., New Haven, 1982, 104–5; A. Bulling, *The Decoration of Mirrors of the Han period: A Chronology*, Ascona, 1960; and Kong and Liu, 56–111.

12. See M. Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality*, London, 1979. For an over-

view of the problems of dating, and the typology of decorative features of Han mirrors, see Bulling (as in n. 11); Loewe, 209–29; and Kong and Liu, 56–111. S. Cahill has suggested the Taoist overtones in bronze mirrors based on a reading of mirror inscriptions; S. Cahill, “The Word Made Mirror: Inscriptions on Medieval Chinese Bronze Mirrors,” *Archives of Asian Art*, xxxix, 1986, 62–70.

13. B. Karlgren, “Early Chinese Mirror Inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 6, 1934, 40, 75. For a study of bronze mirrors in relation to Han beliefs, see Loewe (as in n. 12), though he is mostly concerned with the TLV mirrors.

14. “This kind of pictorial narrative is mostly featured in Han stone-carvings and lacquer paintings. As the decorative pattern for a pictorial mirror, this is extremely rare. There is a lot of meaning here”; S. Umehara, *Shokyo kokyo shuei* (Selected ancient



3 Ink rubbing of stone carving from the left chamber of the Wu Liang Shrine, a pavilion scene (detail), ca. A.D. 151, Shandong (from Chavannes, *Mission archéologique*, II, pl. 65, no. 129)

(suggested by the presence of pretty women) leads to downfall. An early Confucian homily once preached the viewing of the “mirror of Yin,” now the mirror materializes it. So here is a mirror in the double sense of the word: it is about history which is synonymous with the mirror; and it is literally a bronze mirror. The mirror doubles on itself. The trope is materialized in the artifact; the artifact reincarnates the trope. History is indeed *the mirror*.

Five bronze mirrors bearing the Wu Zixu story have been published. Two are now in the Shanghai Museum, one is in the Nanjing Museum, one in the British Museum, and one in the Yamaguchi Collection, Japan.¹⁵ They date from the late Later Han (A.D. 24–220) or Three Kingdom periods (A.D. 220–280),¹⁶ and are of two types of design. The first is exemplified by the Shanghai mirrors (Figs. 4–6) and the London mirror (Fig. 7): four scenes are as described above—the scheming king of Yue and his minister, the two female figures, the screen-enclosed king of Wu, and Wu Zixu

holding a sword.¹⁷ The mirror in the Yamaguchi Collection constitutes the second type (Fig. 8). It shares with the first the image of the sword-brandishing Wu Zixu; on the opposite side, Wu Zixu and the king of Wu are embroiled in a confrontation; the intervening quadrants show horse-drawn carriages.

At least seven early texts contain accounts of the Wu Zixu matter: *Zuo zhuan* (Zuoqiu’s commentary to the Spring and Autumn annals), *Guo yu* (Annals of the states), *Lushi chunqiu* (Master Lu’s Spring and Autumn annals), *Shi ji* (Records of the Historian), *Shuo yuan* (A garden of discourse), *Yue jue shu* (The book of Yue), and *Wu Yue chunqiu* (The Spring and Autumn annals of Wu and Yue).¹⁸ The last two date from the Later Han period. The story of Wu Zixu as it was recounted in Han times has more dramatic twists and turns, largely ignored by the mirror design. The pictorial narrative on the mirror (the scheming, the seduction, and the fall) corresponds well to the two Later Han texts, which are the only versions that make the sending of the two Yue women as bribes a matter of narrative interest. In *Yue jue shu*’s account:

mirrors found at Shaoling tombs), Kyoto, 1939, 49.

15. They were made by two family workshops: Bo and Zou from the Wu region where the historical event of Wu Zixu took place. As suggested by W. P. Yetts, the inscription on the zone surrounding the figured field has no bearing on the latter’s historical import. It is a favorite formula which appears on many mirrors. See W. P. Yetts, “Two Chinese Mirrors,” *Burlington Magazine*, LXXIV, 1939, 27. For the Shanghai mirrors, see S. L. Wang, “Shaoling de gudai tongjing (Ancient mirrors from Shaoling), *Kaogu tongxun*, no. 6, 1956, 101–6, fig. 2; L. X. Shen, “Shanghai wenwu baoguan weiyuanhui suocang de ji mian gujing jieshao” (An introduction to several ancient mirrors at the cultural relics conservation committee of Shanghai), *Wenwu cankao ziliao* (Sources for cultural relics), LXXXIV, no. 8, 1957, 35–36; and Chen (as in n. 10), 9–10, pls. 51, 52.

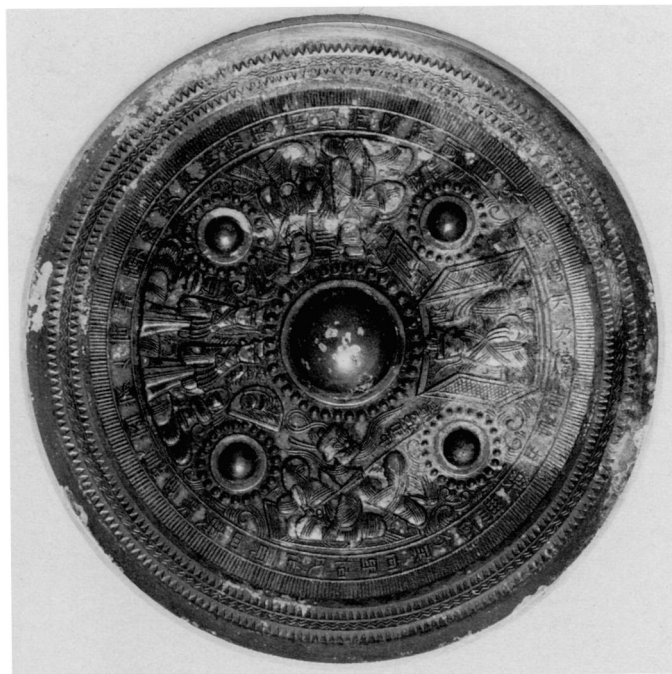
For the Nanjing mirror, see Z. C. Jiang, “Yangzhou diqu chutu de tongjing” (Bronze mirrors excavated from the Yangzhou area), *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, no. 8, 1957, 32–34, fig. 15. For the London mirror, see Yetts, 23–24, pl. 2. For the Yamaguchi mirror, see Umehara (as in n. 14), pl. 49; and T. Higuchi, *Kokyo* (Ancient bronze mirrors), Tokyo, 1979, pl. 56, fig. 111. Shen (36) notes that three Wu Zixu mirrors have “migrated” to overseas collections. To the best of my knowledge, only two of them (i.e., the London and the Yamaguchi mirrors) have been published.

16. Yetts (as in n. 10; 27) dates the London mirror to a period before A.D. 126. Chen (as in n. 10; 52) dates the two Shanghai mirrors to the late Later Han. Z. S. Wang suggests Suzhou as the provenance of one Shanghai mirror and the Yamaguchi mirror, and places them in the period between the mid-Later Han and the end of the Later Han period: see Z. S. Wang, “Wuxian, Shanying, he

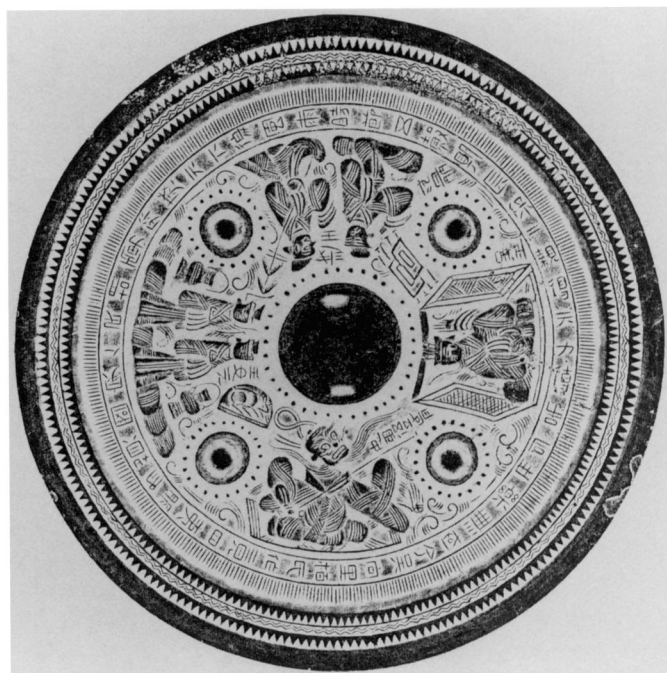
Wucang—cong mingwen kan sanguo shidai Wu de tongjing candi” (Wuxian, Shanying and Wucang—an examination of the provenance of bronze mirror production in the Wu region during the Three Kingdom period on the basis of mirror inscriptions), *Kaogu*, CCXVIII, no. 11, 1985, 1025–31; and idem, “‘Qingyang’ wei Wujun jingong kao” (On “Qingyang” being a mirror craftsman of the Wu Prefecture), *Kaogu*, CCXXVI, no. 7, 1986, 642.

17. This type has a variation: the pairs of men and women in Figs. 4 and 5 (top and left) occupy reversed positions in Figs. 6 and 7 (left and top).

18. D. Johnson has provided some comprehensive and definitive studies of the textual narratives of what he calls “the Wu Zixu matter,” a phrase I borrow here. See Johnson, 93–156, 465–505; and D. Johnson, “Epic and History in Early China: The Matter of Wu Tzu-hsu [Wu Zixu],” *Journal of Asian Studies*, XL, no. 2, Feb. 1981, 255–71.



4 Back of a bronze mirror, *Story of Wu Zixu*, lower Yangzi River Valley, 2nd century. Shanghai Museum (photo: courtesy Shanghai Museum)



5 Ink rubbing of the bronze-mirror back shown in Fig. 4 (from Shanghai Museum, *Shanghai bowuguan cang qingtongqi*, Shanghai, 1964, II, pl. 95)

The kingdom of Yue dressed up Xi Shi and Zheng Dan, and had Minister [Wen] Zhong send them to the king of Wu. Zhong said: "Goujian, king of Yue, privately possesses heaven-sent Xi Shi and Zheng Dan. As a poor and shabby land, Yue does not deserve them. Therefore I have been entrusted to offer them to Your Majesty with reverence." The king of Wu was immensely flattered. Shen Xu [Wu Zixu] admonished: "No, Your Majesty, accept not . . . I hear that wise gentlemen are the treasure of a land; beautiful women, a disaster to a country. The Xia [dynasty] fell because of Mo Xi; the Yin [Shang dynasty] collapsed because of Dan Ji; the Zhou [dynasty] perished as a result of having Bo Si." The king of Wu would not listen. Instead, he accepted the women. On account of Shen Xu's [Wu Zixu] disloyalty, he had him killed.

Yue therefore campaigned against Wu . . . destroyed it, and captured Fuchai [king of Wu]. (*YJS*, 12: 84)

Wu Yue chunqiu, commonly regarded as derivative of *Yue jue shu*, further dramatizes the episode along the same lines (*WYQC*, 5:187–89).¹⁹ The moralized historiographic wisdom is obvious: the fall of a dynasty is attributed to licentious dissipation, with seductive women as the ultimate cause.²⁰ This Han way of thinking underlies the narrative structure on the pictorial mirror. It harks back to the idea of "the Mirror of Yin," only now what had happened in the Spring and Autumn period was remote enough for the Han mind to perceive as yet another Mirror of Yin whose moral was chillingly contemporary.

The Mirror of Yin kind of moral was commonly subscribed to in Han times. It also acquired a pictorial interest, as paintings were used to teach moral lessons. The scandalous dissipation of King Zhou of the Shang with the seductive Dan

Ji was painted in the Western Palace of Emperor Xuan (r. 73–49 B.C.) (*HS*, 66:2891); the court of Emperor Chen (r. 32–6 B.C.) had "painted screens" that showed "the drunken Zhou sitting with Dan Ji enjoying a long night" (*HS*, 100:4201). On both occasions in *Han shu* when such pictures are mentioned, a sober-minded courtier delivers a homily about the moral admonition carried by the images. A bronze mirror now in the Freer Gallery, dating from the Later Han or Three Kingdoms periods, also shows scenes from the Yin-Shang history involving Dan Ji.²¹ It seems that matters of the Shang were a grammar of morality for the Han people, in whose imagination Shang history was reduced to a morality play: Zhou's indulgence with Dan Ji caused the downfall of the dynasty. To illustrate the moral about women's role in history, there was nothing so effective or straightforward as the matter of the Shang.

The Wu Zixu matter to the Han mind was more complex. It was cited to illustrate various moral points. For all the diverse use of this matter as a discursive topos, there was a tension "between the view of Wu Tzu-hsu [Zixu] as a hero who did not hesitate to attack constituted authority to avenge an injury done to his family, and the view of him as a paragon of ministerial loyalty."²²

In this light, as a Later Han product, the bronze mirror design bearing the Wu Zixu matter suggests two things: there was a strong pressure to reiterate the "Mirror-of-Yin" kind of moral by actually materializing it; at the same time, the Later Han contemporary circumstances bred a moral sentiment that could not be fully accommodated by the matter of the Shang. Hence the appropriation of the Wu Zixu matter to serve both as a Mirror of Yin moral and to go beyond it.

If under the Former Han the reductive Han tale of the Shang grossly exaggerated the woman's role to fit the orthodox Confucian teaching of restraint, the exaggeration



6 Back of a bronze mirror, *Story of Wu Zixu*, lower Yangzi River Valley, 2nd century. Shanghai Museum (photo: courtesy Shanghai Museum)



7 Back of a bronze mirror, *Story of Wu Zixu*, lower Yangzi River Valley, 2nd century. London, British Museum (photo: courtesy British Museum)

turned into a rhetorical alarm that bore upon the Later Han political landscape. Toward the end of the Former Han, fear about the imperial power falling into the hands of the empresses started to haunt the collective consciousness:

Though we have today the prince regent, after Your Majesty reaches ten thousand years, [the young prince] would not be able to handle the country. The weight of the imperial power would be carried by the empress whose overriding arrogance knows no boundary. . . . I shudder at the [prospect of] the jeopardized empire and the anarchy of the world. (*HS*, 97:3997)

This anticipated what was to come in the Later Han period. Eight of the eleven Later Han empresses were childless and the heir to the throne had to be “adopted” from the offspring of the imperial harem.²³ With the careful engineering of the empresses’ clans, the Later Han dynasty had a succession of young emperors—the youngest being one hundred-odd days old when enthroned—so that the clans of the supervising empresses could wield the power. The junior emperor, once reaching his majority, would seek to take back power through some scheming alliance with the eunuchs, putting an end to the reign of the consort families, which would in turn counteract by purging the eunuch partisans.



8 Back of a bronze mirror, *Story of Wu Zixu*, lower Yangzi River Valley, 2nd century. Japan, K. Yamaguchi Collection (from S. Umehara, *Shokyo kokyo shuei* [Selected ancient mirrors found at Shaoxing tombs], Kyoto, 1939, pl. 49)

19. For the derivation of WYQC from YJS, see Q. D. Chen, “Dianjiao ben Yue jue shu xu (Preface to annotated edition of *Yue jue shu*) in YJS, 13. For a study of YJS, see Q. Li, “*Yue jue shu yanjiu*” (A study of *Yue jue shu*), *Journal of East China Normal University*, no. 6, 1984, 55–59. For a study of WYQC, see Johnson, 152–56.

20. This misogynistic tradition has been discredited by modern historians, both Chinese and Western. See, for instance, A. Wright, “Sui Yang-ti:

Personality and Stereotype,” in *Confucianism and Chinese Civilization*, ed. A. Wright, Stanford, 1975, 158–87.

21. The Freer mirror is related to the Wu Zixu mirror in a number of ways. Both make historical references; both convey a moral about court debaucheries. Furthermore, their inscriptions, drawing on a common formula, are almost identical. Both share the motif of an enthroned king against a screen; both use figural gesticulation. There are elements of the Freer mirror that suggest a date

later than that of the Wu Zixu mirror. See T. Higuchi and M. Hayashi, eds., *Chugoku bijutsu, kan 4: doko, gyoku* (Chinese art in Western collections, iv: Bronze and jade), Tokyo, 1973, pl. 82; and Freer Gallery of Art, *A Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue of Chinese Bronzes*, Washington, D.C., 1946, 80–85, pl. 40:39.52.

22. Johnson, 490.

23. *Cambridge History of China*, 259.



9 Ink rubbing of a decorated brick (detail), a sword-bearing figure, Nanyang, ca. 25–220 (from C. F. Zhao, ed., *Nanyang Handai huaxiangzhuan* [Decorated tomb bricks of the Han dynasty at Nanyang], Beijing, 1990, fig. 53)

The whole Later Han political history, especially from Hedi's First Year of Yunyuan (A.D. 89) onward, is a seesaw between the two factions, with eunuchs and the consort families alternately taking over.²⁴

This caused a collective loathing among cultured loyalists, which is fully articulated in Zhong Changtong's (A.D. 180–220) diatribe, one of the rare Later Han documents preserved in Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu*:

Imperial power falls into the hands of consort families; the emperor's favors are bestowed on the eunuchs who are his confidants . . . the roles of the wise and the idiots have been reversed. . . . The people flee and are afflicted by anxiety and misery. Bitter voices rise from the four

quarters; yin and yang have lost their equilibrium. The sun, moon, and stars are eclipsed. Strange phenomena frequently occur. The crops are infested with insects; flood in one area and drought in another reach catastrophic proportions. These are all caused by the power struggle between the consort families and the eunuchs. But [the emperor] issues decrees that blame, dismiss, and execute the Three Dignitaries. All this makes one cry to heaven and shed blood-stained tears. . . . The practice of allowing suicide began with Jia Yi of old times pleading for preserving the honor codes of the ministers in view of the humiliation suffered by the marquis of Jiang [Zhou Bo]. Since then it has hardened into a convention. The succeeding emperors have been born to this [suicidal convention] and have taken it for granted. How sad! Those who hold the map of the world in their left hands are compelled to slit their own throats with their right. Even the idiots know how hard it is, not to mention the wise men. (*HHS*, 49:1657–58)

As a typical Han epideictic discourse, this speech has a binary structure of dispraise and praise: condemning the consort families and eunuchs on the one hand, and praising or sighing for the loyalists persecuted or driven to suicide for outspokenness on the other. A change in the iconographic program in Later Han pictorial art corresponds to this rhetorical structure. The Former Han representation of corrupt kings' debauchery with beautiful women seems to be compositionally self-sufficient, as one gathers from *Han shu* (*HS*, 66:2891, 100:4201). The Later Han pictorial illustration of the same theme, by contrast, juxtaposes "depraved consorts, misguided rulers" with "royal statesmen, filial sons," as shown in the mural covering the Hall of Numinous Brilliance in Lu recorded in an ekphrasis by a mid-second-century gentleman.²⁵

The narrative scheme on the Wu Zixu mirror more explicitly echoes Zhong Changtong's double-edged rhetorical structure: the potential threats posed by beautiful women on the one hand, the poignancy of jeopardized loyalists on the other hand; the consequences of licentiousness on the one hand, and the tragedy of forced suicide on the other; moral indignation on the one hand, and pathos on the other. If the epideictic structure of the pictorial narrative is matched with the Later Han scenario, a probable meaning can be discerned: revulsion against the eunuchs/consort families on the one hand, and sympathy for the persecuted loyalists on the other.²⁶ This double-edged moral in the pictorial narrative not only corresponds to the rhetorical or argumentative pattern exemplified by Zhong's invective, but is also the rhetorical structure shared by the *Yue jue shu*, a major Later Han text about the Wu Zixu matter:

24. *Ibid.*, 258–59, 280–87.

25. "Last come the Three Tyrants, /Depraved consorts, misguided rulers, /Royal statesmen, filial sons, /Heroic knights, chaste women, /Worthies and fools, the failed and accomplished," Wang Yanshou (ca. 124–ca. 148), "Lu lingguang dian fu" (Rhapsody on the Hall of Numinous Brilliance in Lu), in *Wen xuan* (General anthology of prose and verse), ed. Xiao Tong (501–531), trans. D. R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, Princeton, N.J., 1982, 275.

26. This matching of rhetorical structure with visual imagery is conceptually indebted to M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanistic Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350–1450*, Oxford, 1971; and H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, Princeton, N.J., 1981.

27. This passage is attributed to Cao Zhi (A.D. 192–232), cited from Zhang Yanyuan, *Lidai minghua ji* (Records of famous paintings through the ages), in *Huashi congshu* (Collectanea of painting history), ed. A. L. Yu, Shanghai, 1962, 1, 1:12;

translation adapted from Bush and Shih, 28.

28. The primacy of intentions has been attacked on four fronts, by literary criticism, anthropology, philosophical hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis. The literary historians' dismissal of intention started with the New Critics' war on "intentional fallacy" and culminated in R. Barthes's declaration of the "death of the author." Anthropologists have traditionally prided themselves on being able to measure judiciously what the ethnographer/observer knows against what the tribal informer/actor tells,

How sad! Fuchai trusted Taizhai Pi rather than believing in Wu Zixu. Hence this disaster [similar to] Li Ji plaguing Jin [State], Bao Si destroying the Zhou [dynasty]. Their beauty is comparable to painting, their menace at odds with human spirits. [Their beauty] causes the cities and states to fall—this should be a good moral enlightening the princes to come; [to see the consequences of] a beautiful frame and charming physiognomy, one turns to the mirror of the historical past. (*YJS*, 9:71)

The Wu Zixu mirror seems to have answered that urge to turn “to the mirror of the historical past.” In this ethos, it is impossible not to see its design as an accommodation to the Later Han angst. If history on the mirror had any meaning, it is something a Later Han eye would have immediately grasped as a contemporary predicament: the woman’s role, the imminent collapse of the empire, and the pathos of the innocents’ suicide:

Of those who look at pictures, there is not one who, beholding the Three Majesties and the Five Emperors, would not look up in reverence; nor any that before a painting of the degenerate rulers of the Three Decades would not be moved to sadness. . . . At the sight of the loyal vassals dying for their principles, who would not harden his own resolve, and who would not sigh at beholding banished ministers and persecuted sons? Who would not avert his eyes from the spectacle of a licentious husband or a jealous wife? . . . From this we may know that paintings are the means of preserving mirrors and admonitions.²⁷

So is the mirror that preserves pictures for the same end. This was an age that cried out for mirrors—and not just mirrors, but mirrors with “paintings” on them.

Mirror and Posture: The Rhetoric of Madness

The political-historical scenario laid out above is a reconstruction poised between the conceptual design of the artifact and the imagined Han viewer’s response. One can neither rule it out on the basis of lack of evidence, nor can sufficient evidence be mustered to confirm it as the original intention. It is thus posed as one possible reading, which may clash with an equally viable, if cynical, contention: the binary structure seen in the pictorial narrative is no more than sex (women as gifts) and violence (suicide). Spicing a visual narrative with sex and violence is as much an ancient storytelling interest as it is today; and the mirror may well have been designed simply to pander to the popular appetite for historical romance and narrative sensationalism. While neither conten-

tion lays an absolute claim to the original intention, the question may be formulated differently. Rather than taking “intention” too rigidly, one may, for instance, generally bolster one’s symptomatic reading with recent critical theories about the irrelevance of the authorial intention.²⁸ More specifically, one may, following Michael Baxandall, formulate a different order of intention, that is, some discernible “intention of the picture” rather than the intention of the designer. The foregoing political-historical reading is based on the *narrative* or *compositional* structure on the mirror while disregarding the *stylistic* interest, which may also betray certain pictorial intentions more or less related to what was *meant*. The “intention” here, as formulated by Baxandall, does not mean a reconstituted psychological state or a set of mental events inside the head of the mirror designer, but rather the traces of the artist unreflectively acquiescing to—and departing from—established institutions, professional habits and skills, generic conventions, and formal constraints. “So ‘intention’ here is referred to pictures rather more than to painters. In particular cases it will be a constructive descriptive of a relationship between a picture and its circumstances.”²⁹ Put in a slightly different way by Erwin Panofsky, “intentions . . . can only be formulated in terms of alternatives: a situation has to be supposed in which the maker of the work had more than one possibility of procedure, that is to say, in which he found himself confronted with a problem of choice between various modes of emphasis.”³⁰

Such choices are clearly discernible in the design of the Wu Zixu mirrors. The pictorial representation is fairly exclusive compared with the texts. It includes: (1) the Yue scheming; (2) the women sent on their way to Wu; (3) the king of Wu in blind intransigence; (4) Wu Zixu’s final suicide. These narrative elements by their very nature have a strong visual interest. On the basis of the two most relevant Later Han texts—*Yue jue shu* and *Wu Yue chunqiu*—the beautiful Yue women are none other than Xi Shi and Zheng Dan. To the Han eye, “painting Xi Shi and Mao Qiang delights the heart.”³¹ In the Han imagination, Xi Shi was a paragon of beauty, and the Han viewer’s expectation of a painting of her was rather uncompromising, as in *Huainanzi* (Essays by Master Huainan): “If one paints Xi Shi’s face so that it is beautiful yet not pleasing, or defines [the famous warrior] Meng Pen’s eyes so that they are large yet not terrifying, the matter of form will be lacking.”³² The reference suggests an actual currency of paintings of Xi Shi and the exacting criteria concerning the cosmetic modeling of her beauty. The mirror design structurally corresponds well to the *Huainanzi*’s juxtaposition of feminine beauty with a masculine warrior with his “large” and “terrifying” eyes, except

which has led to a similar Barthesian dictum: “The sheikh is long dead.” The hermeneutical claim “to understand the text . . . even better than its author” goes back to the Romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. The delving of psychoanalysis into the realm of the unconscious is now almost part of a common discourse. See W. Wimsatt, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, with M. C. Beardsley, Lexington, Ky., 1954, 2–18.; C. Geertz, “Native’s Point of View: Anthropological Understanding,” in *Local*

Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology, New York, 1983, 55–72; F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. H. Kimmerle, trans. J. Duke and J. Forstman, Atlanta, 1977, 112; and P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Evanston, Ill., 1974. It is necessary to point out, however, that critical art historians have never taken “intention” simple-mindedly; see, e.g., E. Panofsky, “The Concept of Artistic Volition,” trans. K. J. Northcott and J. Snyder, *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1981, 17–19.

29. M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven, 1985, 41–42.

30. E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N.Y., 1955, 21.

31. Wang Fu (active mid-2nd century A.D.), *Qian fu lun* (Essays by Master Anonymous), in *ZZJC*, viii, 14:64.

32. *Huainanzi* (Essays by Master Huainan), ed. Liu An, in *ZZJC*, vii, 16:281; trans., Bush and Shih, 28.



10 Ink rubbing of a decorated brick (detail), fighting warriors, Nanyang, ca. 25–220 (from Zhao, *Nanyang*, fig. 158)

that the feminine beauty on the mirror is not fully realized as one might expect from such a prescribed yin/yang pairing. The designer of the Wu Zixu mirror seems to have chosen to ignore a potential pictorial cadenza accorded by a legitimate narrative pretext. The two female figures, one of them being Xi Shi, receive only a perfunctory treatment (Figs. 4–7); they seem rather wooden, merely a matter-of-fact filling of a narrative niche. More curiously unsettling is the fact that while all other figures on the mirror are identified by their names, which are inscribed beside them, the inscription beside the two women reads: “Two palace ladies” or “Two

jade ladies.”³³ This type of figure often appears on other pictorial mirrors as Everyman or Everywoman in search of immortality.³⁴ While this anonymity does not detract from the moral of the pictorial narrative and does not necessarily contradict the iconographical identification of the two as Xi Shi and Zheng Dan, their woodenness compared with Wu Zixu’s feisty image does suggest where the primacy of pictorial interest lies.

While a cursory mode of *narration* characterizes all the other figures, Wu Zixu receives a *description*. Narrative dynamics come to a halt of iconic stasis here. An alterna-

33. The inscription 王女二人 *wangnu er ren*, if taken as it is, should mean “two palace ladies.” But an alternative reading of the inscription as “two jade women” is possible for three reasons: most Later Han mirrors bear female figures accompanied by the inscription 玉女 *yunu* (jade ladies), which is close to 王女 *wangnu* (palace ladies) in pictographic form; Han mirror inscriptions often misspell words; and “jade women” could mean, as M. Hayashi argues, “beautiful women” other than its normal Taoist connotations. For a discussion of the Han crafts-

man’s crude manner of inscribing mirrors, see S. L. Wang, “Han liuchao jingming chutan” (A preliminary inquiry into the mirror inscriptions of Han and Six dynasties), *Kaogu tongxun*, xxvii, 1958, 83–89. For a discussion of “jade women” on Later Han bronze mirrors, see M. Hayashi, *Kandai no kamigami* (The spirits and demons of the Han period) Kyoto, 1989, 119–20. The inscription attending the two female figures on the London mirror reads: *yuewang ernu* 越王二女, which means either “two daughters of the Yue king” or “two ladies from the Yue king.” The former is unsupported by any surviving textual evidences, while the

latter is consistent with *Wuyue chungiu*.

34. See, e.g., Umehara (as in n. 14), pl. 61.

35. The two mirrors were made by the same Bo family workshop at Suzhou of the Wu Prefecture in the Later Han period; see Wang, 1985 (as in n. 16), 1026.

36. The notion of “portraiture” is a complex one in the context of Han art. “Portraiture” is loosely used in this paper as pertaining to the attempt to depict the idiosyncratic features and manners with an emphatic attention to physiognomic details, accompanied by an inscription designating the figure to

tive representation of the same story on the Yamaguchi mirror (Fig. 8) further confirms the primacy of the Wu Zixu image. The two pairs of figures featured on the other mirrors (Figs. 4–7) are there replaced with chariot processions. The same Wu Zixu image shared by the two design versions, virtually unaltered, carries the burden of a certain pictorial intention, the “point” being made.³⁵

The figure of Wu Zixu is strikingly unusual in the idiom of bronze mirror design. While most such images—even including the Queen Mother of the West—are iconic or notational representations, this one aspires toward the condition of portraiture.³⁶ Stoutly poised, Wu Zixu is shown with his head tilted, the wide-open eyes glaring in frenzy, eyebrows bristling, beard and whiskers fluttering in the air, his left hand forcefully thrust forward, his sleeves blown up in an agitated gesture, and his right hand defiantly holding a long sword (Figs. 4–8). Such a characterization of individual features and theatrical posturing is almost unprecedented among Han bronze mirror designs.

Little is known about the standard Han iconographical convention for Wu Zixu as he was represented in the courtly pictorial idiom.³⁷ The Wu Zixu image on the mirrors points to certain figural types. As linear modeling is the favored medium for bronze mirror design in the Wu region and the casting requires a certain graphic clarity, its stylistic vocabulary shares a great deal with stone carvings in which figures fall neatly into categories of social types. Though Wu Zixu’s appearance is stylistically much more refined than the stone-carved images, it nevertheless appears to have a close affinity to types in the vernacular pictorial idiom: a gatekeeper with wide-open eyes and clear-cut wrinkles on the forehead,³⁸ a weapon-toting warrior with his snarling face fully displayed (Fig. 9), a swordsman with wildly expanded eye sockets and bristling beard and whiskers (Fig. 10), or even a zoomorphic mask.³⁹ Questions then arise as to the implications of such posturing. It is tempting to associate the image’s menacing character with recorded instances of mirrors being made to serve bizarre purposes—such as the Taoists’ use of mirrors as demonifuge armor in their mountain excursions,⁴⁰ or the military use of mirrors as a battlefield ploy (*HHS*, 87:2886)—to explain its militant tone. Following a local cult of Wu Zixu as a water spirit, a harbinger of rain, and a guardian god of the Wu region,⁴¹ and on the basis of the general auspicious mood embodied in the Later Han bronze mirrors, one might also think of the mirror as a protective charm for the Wu people who, because of their

geographical location, lived in fear of tidal bores. These speculations, however, founder for a lack of specific circumstantial evidence. Moreover, any explanation of art objects purely in terms of function forecloses a more sensitive reading of them as symptoms of culture.

The Han construction of the Wu Zixu image presumably had to reckon with three conditions: (1) it had to fit the general run of stories circulated about Wu Zixu; (2) it necessarily drew on the available pictorial idiom and was cued for contemporary viewers with their cognitive style and mental equipment;⁴² and (3) the pictorial characterization of Wu Zixu as a Later Han construct addressed Later Han circumstances. The first factor prompts us to examine Han narrative texts for the kind of stories that were current among the Han people with special attention to the Wu region; the second factor alerts us to the period terms and descriptive categories through which the Han mind ordered its cultural experience and structured its visual perceptions—what appears to us as a grimace may have been an expression of agony to the Han eye; and the third factor relates to the Later Han moral climate.

As noted above, the two most relevant texts are *Yue jue shu* and *Wu Yue chungqiu*. Both date from the Later Han and both are from the Wu region; so are the mirrors with the Wu Zixu story. It is fitting, therefore, to match the Wu Zixu image on the mirror with certain period terms and expressive categories in these texts so that the pictorial mood can be properly gauged. Hayashi Minao, for instance, identifies the image as the visual illustration of a textual description in *Wu Yue chungqiu*: “Thrusting an arm forward in indignation and drawing out his sword, Wu Zixu confronted [the king of Wu].”⁴³ It matches well with the image on the mirror, but the specificity of this approach to the exclusion of other possibilities is problematic in its underlying assumption that the pictorial design is *only* a faithful transcription of the textual sources.

Ancient narrative texts are often distillations of oral storytelling. Oral narratives about Wu Zixu were circulated in the Lower Yangzi River Valley in Han times.⁴⁴ Texts such as *Yue jue shu* and *Wu Yue chungqiu* are no more than linguistic fossils of a vast body of oral histories and other related texts now lost. To believe that the artisans and designers of the Wu Zixu image slavishly transcribed certain specific texts is a result of our modern taste for prioritizing the written word over speech or over images. Moreover, the moment identified by Hayashi does not correspond with the force of the

be a particular historical personage. For a good discussion of early Chinese portraiture, see A. G. Spiro, *Contemplating the Ancients: Aesthetic and Social Issues in Early Chinese Portraiture*, Berkeley, 1990.

37. The Wu Zixu image was painted elsewhere in Han times. It appears on the Later Han tomb mural at Hologol, on the south wall of the middle chamber, over the passageway, and is reported but not illustrated in Inner Mongolia Museum, *Helinge'er Hanmu bishu* (Murals in the Hologol Han dynasty tomb), Beijing, 1978, 35. The general

condition of the figures on the mural is too cursorily sketchy to be very illuminating.

38. See C. F. Zhao, ed., *Nanyang handai huaxiangzhuan* (Decorated tomb bricks of the Han Dynasty at Nanyang), Beijing, 1990, fig. 48.

39. See D. Zhou et al., *Henan handai huaxiangzhuan* (Han Dynasty brick reliefs from Henan), Shanghai, 1985, fig. 202.

40. Ge Hong, *Bao pu zi* (Book of the Preservation-of-Solidarity Master), in *ZZJC*, viii, 17:77. For a general survey of the different functions and uses of bronze mirrors, see J. Needham, *Science and Civil-*

ization in China, Cambridge, 1962, iv, pt. 1, 87–91.

41. Johnson, 472.

42. Here I am indebted to M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford, 1972, 29–40.

43. “伍子胥擢臂大怒，擗劍而對曰，” *WYQC*, 3:101. For Hayashi’s argument, see Hayashi (as in n. 33), 119–20.

44. See Johnson, 465–505.

narrative logic. The story of Wu Zixu was remembered mostly for its climactic and poignant finale and for the paths of his suicidal martyrdom. It is no coincidence that Wu Zixu's final vengeful outcry ("Gouge out my eyes and hang them over the gate-tower of Wu, I would like to see the Yue army storming the capital of Wu") is perpetuated in different Han textual versions.⁴⁵ The pictorial narrative on the mirror has a clear sense of dramatic ending. Wu Zixu's deranged physiognomy and posture indicate the finale of his tragic suicide, which all textual versions dramatize. The above-quoted description in *Wu Yue chungqu* occurs after Wu Zixu's admonition to the king of Wu against the Yue scheme is first rejected. The climax actually comes a few days later:

Having heard [Wu] Zixu's grievance and resentment, the king of Wu had a decorated sword sent [to Wu Zixu]. Zixu received the sword. Baring his feet and lifting his robes, he walked down the hall steps into the center of the courtyard. Looking up in an outcry of injustice . . . he bent over the sword and died. (*WYQC*, 3:104–5)

As a product of the Later Han Wu area, the image must have taken cues from the local understanding of Wu Zixu. In the Wu region, the persona of Wu Zixu was registered in popular imagination mostly in terms of his postmortem behavior. Wang Chong (A.D. 27–ca. 97) of the Wu region notes:

It has been recorded that the king of Wu, Fuchai, put Wu Zixu to death, had him cooked in a cauldron, sewed into a leather pouch, and thrown into the river. Wu Zixu, incensed, lashed up the waters so that they rose in great waves, and drowned people. Nowadays, temples have been set up on the great rivers of Kuaiji and Dantu and on the Zhe River of Qiangtang to appease his resentful mind and put to rest the wrathful tidal bore.⁴⁶

Wu Zixu's conduct after death in *Yue jue shu* is even more spectacular:

the body was thrown into the gorge of the great river . . . there were reverberations, wrathful gallopings and the spirit dashing like a racing horse, overwhelming the world. The sea was its spiritual abode. Every now and then, the noise resumed. Posterity commented on this: this is all Zixu's water commotions. (*YJS*, 14:102)

This passage captures the way in which Wu Zixu was viewed in the Wu region: as *wrathful* and *vengeful*. It is these moods that define his image on the mirror. This is confirmed by Wang Chong's impression of contemporary paintings of Wu Zixu now lost to us.

Zixu entered the river of Yue to stir tidal bores. He should have gone into the Wu territory, rather than the Yue. It

does not make any sense that he resented the king of Wu by taking it out on the river of Yue. . . . Now not having his body intact, Wu Zixu could not have acted like Dubo and Ziyi, taking his revenge upon the king of Wu. How can the rolling to and fro of the waves be considered a revenge or a proof of Wu Zixu's consciousness? Popular legends, though not true, form the subjects of paintings, and even wise and intelligent men allow themselves to be mystified by these pictures.⁴⁷

Wang Chong was here disputing the popular belief concerning Wu Zixu's stirring of tidal bores. He regretted that the paintings were based on the "popular legends" about Wu Zixu and were therefore misleading. For our purposes, Wang Chong's critique reveals a Later Han iconographical convention for Wu Zixu in the Lower Yangzi region: he was represented in a mood of wrathful and vengeful rancor.

It is thus that we should gauge the Wu Zixu image on the mirror. Rather than limited to a specific moment in a particular text, the finale of the mirror's pictorial narrative subsumes the totality of the wrathful Wu Zixu caught in both his final moment of protest and agony and his unrest after death. Mirror designs of this kind tend to perpetuate a myth rather than to document a history. Thus, a description from *Wu Yue chungqu* of Wu Zixu's postmortem intervention in the Wu-Yue warfare equally fits the image on the mirror: "Wu Zixu's head was as gigantic as a wheel, his eyes as dazzling as a lightning rod. His hairs spread out and shot in four directions, reaching as far as ten *li*."⁴⁸ Hayashi's identification of the image with a textual passage is relevant only insofar as the written descriptions provide a more period-oriented emotional register and descriptive category, such as "thrusting his arm forward in a rage" and "unsheathed his sword to confront the opponent,"⁴⁹ for us to verbalize the images of the past, and to adhere to the period measurement of certain pictorial moods. As such, they are not peculiar to a specific narrative context, but applicable to the general run of the Later Han images.

Han narrative—both verbal and pictorial—can be theatrically mannered. The culture seems to have had an urgent need for highly expressive and externalized postures and gestures:

The emotion stirs within and is expressed without—through language. If language is not enough, one sighs. If sighing is not enough, one sings. If singing is not enough, one dances with hands and feet in spite of oneself.⁵⁰

When people's minds and natures are in sorrow, by reason of death, there arises grief; and with grief comes mourning. Weeping excites the nerves, and excitement leads to passion. Passion, on the other hand, wants to express itself in physical movements; so there ensues the gesture

45. *LSCQ*, 23:301; *SJ*, 66:2184; *SY*, 9:19; *WYQC*, 3:101; *YJS*, 14:102.

46. *LH*, 37; trans. based on A. Forke, *Lun-Heng: Philosophical Essays by Wang Ch'ung*, New York, 1962, pt. 1, 248.

47. *LH*, 38; trans. based on Forke (as in n. 46), pt. 2, 250.

48. "伍子胥頭若車輪目若燧電鬚髮四張射於十里," *WYQC*, 6:219.

49. "擗臂大怒 擗劍而對," *WYQC*, 3:101.

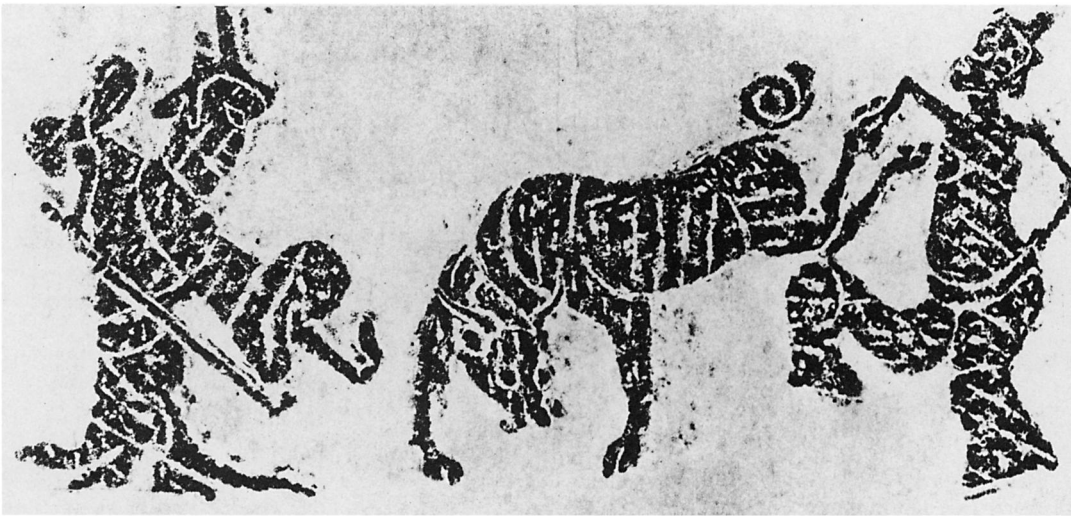
50. *Shi maoshi zhuan* (Poetry annotated by Master Mao with further commentaries), ed. H. Chen, Taipei, 1967, 1:11. For a critical commentary on the passage, see S. Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, 41–43.

51. *Huananzhi* (as in n. 32), 8:123; trans. E. Morgan, *Tao the Great Luminant: Essays from Huan Nan Tzu*, Shanghai, n.d., 97.

52. "於是韓王勃然作色擗臂瞋目按劍仰天太息曰寡人雖不肖必不能事秦。"

53. "寢嘗擗相噴怒而見齒也。"

54. The gold-plaque figure is on a fragmented



11 Ink rubbing of a stone carving (detail), bullfighting, Nanyang, 1st century B.C.–A.D. 1st century (from J. Z. Wang and X. S. Shan, *Nanyang lianghan huaxiangshi* [Han stone-carvings from Nanyang], Beijing, 1990, fig. 147)

of hand and foot. . . . Garments of frayed edges, caps of hemp, rough hemp clothes and mourning staff are the symbolic ornaments of a mourning spirit. The pangs of sorrow have their regulations, whereby grief is restrained within bounds. Arms, wands, metal drums, battle-axes and halberds symbolize anger. There is the fact; and the symbolic representation of it is shown.⁵¹

This Han theory of the physical expression of an emotional state is more or less realized in the Wu Zixu image. Nor is the arm-thrusting and sword-brandishing gesture peculiar to the Wu Zixu story. The period description of physical postures has certain stock categories of such gestures. A fitting description comes from *Shi ji*: “At this, the king of Han State suddenly flared up. Stretching his arm, his eyes wide open, one of his hands on his sword, he lifted up his face toward heaven, and sighed: I may be good for nothing; but I certainly cannot attend to Qin” (*SJ*, 69:2253).⁵² The description matches the Wu Zixu image well: the flaring up, the snarl, the stretched arm, the hand on sword, the upward-turned face, and, perhaps, the wide-open mouth, which may well be the heavy sigh (*taixi*), though to the modern eye it appears as a snarl. At least we know that in the Han mode of visualization, when the eyes are wide open in a fit of rage, the teeth are also shown. This is what is frequently described in the Han texts as *yaci*, a period term defined by *Shiji suoyin zhu* (Commentaries on the *Records of the Historian*) as “a glaring look with one’s teeth shown” (*SJ*, 79:2414).⁵³

The currency of such verbal categories of gestures paralleled the circulation of comparable pictorial motifs. The emphatic gesture or posture of arm stretching, for example, is one of the persistent motifs in the Han pictorial idiom. A

cut-out gold-plaque figure on a lacquer box (that had once contained a bronze mirror) excavated from a late Former Han tomb at Changsha is an early precedent. The figure is shown in a sitting posture with the head defiantly tilted to one side and the right arm emphatically thrust forward.⁵⁴ The motif also appears elsewhere: on stone carvings from Henan (Fig. 11) and Later Han tombs from Shandong (Fig. 12). A painted silk banner from a Former Han tomb at Linyi (Fig. 13) shows a sword-bearing figure confronting an equally defiant man on the left; or the two may be engaged in an animated conversation or argument.⁵⁵ The stylization of the sharply tilted head and the balloonlike robe in many ways looks forward to the Wu Zixu image on the mirror. The most emphatic use of these motifs is in the Later Han tomb at Yi’nan. The middle chamber of the nine-chamber tomb is decorated with stone wall-panels on which is engraved a series of historical scenes—historical to the Han people, that is. The figuration is stylized: the snarl with bared teeth; the drapery flung high with agitated gestures (Fig. 14), executed in expressive lines, sharply incised and flamboyantly fluid. Among these historical tableaux, one man in Figure 14 is almost a reversed mirror image of the Wu Zixu figure (Figs. 4–8) in his snarling features, streaming beard, and gesticulating posture.

Such theatrical posturing points to a particular cultural ethos. Examining the provenances of these images, one finds a pattern of regional distribution. With the arm-thrusting Changsha figure as an early prototype, the Chu cultural trait, or the southern ethos, lends itself as a clue. During the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring States periods, the Chu state had the largest territory among the competing states.⁵⁶

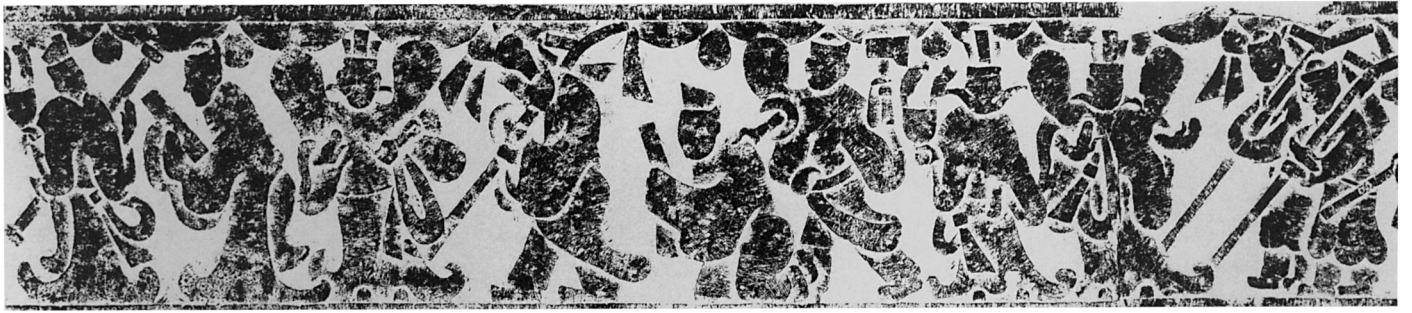
lacquer box and belongs to a large, widely assorted group of such figures, including a chariot driver, horse-rider, tortoise rider, dancer, musician, archer, acrobat, and various animal figurines. See Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Science, *Changsha fajue baogao* (Excavation report from Changsha), Beijing, 1957, 122–23, pl. 83.

55. See Linyi Han Tomb Excavation Team, “Shan-

dong Linyi Jinqieshan jiuhaohanmu fajue jianbao” (Excavation report on no. 9 Han tomb at Jinqieshan of Linyi, Shandong), *Wenwu*, no. 11, 1977, 24–27.

56. In its heyday, its terrain included what is now south Henan, east Sichuan, southeast Shanxi, the whole of Hunan and Hubei, and the major parts of

Jiangxi, Anhui, Jiangsu, and parts of Guizhou and Yunnan. See E. Z. Tong, “Cong chutu wenwu kan chuwenhua yu nanfang zhu mingzhu de guanxi” (The relationship of Chu culture and its southern ethnic groups: Excavated relics as witness), *Hunan kaogu jikan* (Papers on Hunan archaeology), no. 3, 1986, 168.



12 Ink rubbing of a carved stone slab (detail), execution scenes, Linyi, Shandong, 2nd century A.D. (from Shandong Provincial Museum, *Shandong huaxiangshi xuanji* [Selected Han pictorial stone carvings from Shandong], Ji'nan, 1982, pl. 363)

The provenances of the above-mentioned images fall within this area.⁵⁷ The Wu region—the provenance of the Wu Zixu mirror—as part of southern China was saturated with the Chu culture. “Wu and Yue bordered Chu,” wrote the Han historian Ban Gu in his geographical introduction to the Wu region, “[and] after a succession of annexations, their popular cultures became approximately identical” (*HS*, 28:1668).

The Chu culture spawned a flamboyant mannerism both in words and in deeds. With the perpetuation of the Chu culture, certain prototypical character traits—reinforced by the Qu Yuan lore—also lived on. The most prominent is the *Chukuang* (madman of Chu) type, a deranged man unusually endowed but socially self-exiled.⁵⁸ The prototype is Jieyu, the Madman of Chu, who is known for “singing while ridiculing Confucius.”⁵⁹ The Han texts somehow follow a visualizing formula in imagining this ancient figure. He is commonly portrayed in *Lushi chunqiu*, *Hanshi waizhuan*, *Shi ji*, and various Han commentaries on *The Analects* as “feigning madness by wearing long and disheveled hair.”⁶⁰ This formula then extends to all madmen of Chu, especially Qu Yuan. *Shi ji* describes Qizi and Jieyu as “having their bodies painted so that they rot; having their disheveled hair down so that they appear mad [*kuang*]” (*SJ*, 79:2691); it portrays Qu Yuan as “strolling to the riverside, with his disheveled hair down, he murmured poems as he went along; he looked worn-out and haggard” (*SJ*, 84:2486). *Yue jue shu* reiterates the motif by extending the visual formula to other southern figures: “Fan Li concealed his background, wearing his hair long and disheveled to feign madness” (*YJS*, 15:108). Likewise, as Wu Zixu first came to the state of Wu, he is portrayed in *Wu Yue chunqiu* as a man “with his disheveled hair down, bare-footed, to feign madness” (*WYCQ*, 1:28). This apparent derangement is captured by the image on the mirror—though the disheveled hair turns into long, streaming beard and whiskers: a man driven to madness. This visual rhetoric is both narratively relevant and culturally pertinent. Wu

Zixu, a native of Chu, was commonly evoked in the Han rhapsodies as Qu Yuan's alter ego. They shared the same fate and the same character trait.⁶¹

That Wu Zixu's image has a Madman overtone to it had a Later Han relevance when the *kuangshen* (the mad scholar) type came into vogue. A *kuangshen* is usually someone learned but socially estranged. Zhong Changtong, the author of the epideictic speech cited earlier, “dares to make shocking remarks, has a disdain of social conventions, and is capricious in moods. People call him *kuangshen*” (*HHS*, 49:1644).

The visualizing formula that associates the *kuangshen* type with disheveled and let-down hair is not only applicable to historical figures but fits Later Han contemporary figures as well:

(Xiang) Yu has been a scholar since adolescence. He is capricious. Always reading *Laozi*, he affects the manner of a Taoist. He also behaves like a *kuangshen*, much given to wearing his disheveled hair down and donning a *jiang xiao* headgear. . . . Often sitting on a wooden couch, he remains laconic, and is fond of long howling. When distinguished guests come nearby, he bends over and averts his eyes. (*HHS*, 81:2691)

Bao pu zi records that a fad developed toward the end of the Han period. There were those who would “keep their hair and whiskers long and unkempt, their clothes in disarray. They may greet guests in pajamas; or they crouch half-naked.”⁶² Something of this mannerism and attitude is captured by the Wu Zixu figure. A comparison with the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove of the following ages, the flamboyant models of self-assertive individuals, seems relevant: with the likes of the Wu Zixu image in sight, would the Seven Worthies be far behind?⁶³

57. Both Linyi and Yi'nan in south Shandong were annexed into the Chu territory during the late Warring States period; the Chu culture had left its imprint on these regions. The excavated goods from the tombs of the area—especially the distinctive Chu-style banner paintings—are in many ways closely related to those from the Mawangdui at Changsha. On the Chu influences on the south Shandong, see Y. J. Jiang and W. Q. Wu, “Shilun

Shandong Han huaxiangshi de fenbu kefa yu fenqi” (The pictorial stone carvings in Shandong: Distribution, carving methods, and periodization), *Kaogu yu wenwu*, no. 4, 1980, 110.

58. For an extended discussion of the Madman of Chu and southern cultural prototypes, see Schneider, 13–14.

59. *Lunyu zhengyi* (The annotated *Analects*), ed. Liu Baonan, in *ZZJC*, 1, 21:390.

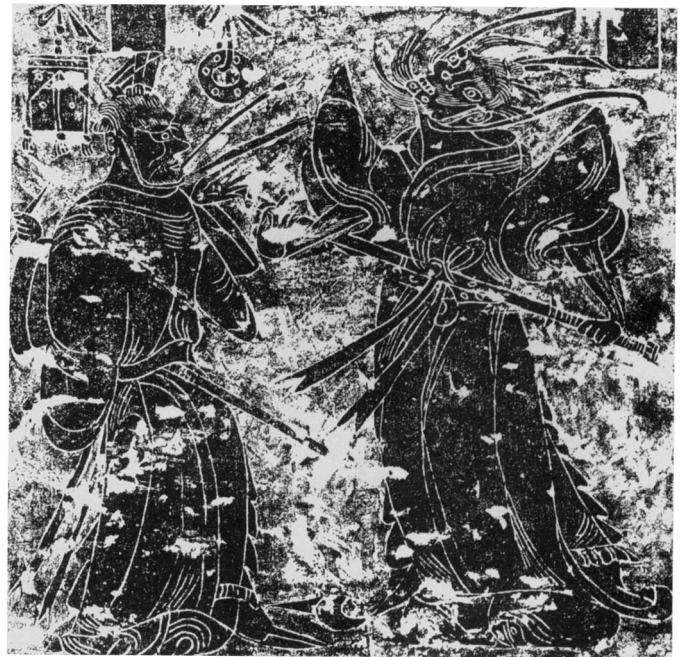
60. See *Lunyu zhengyi* (as in n. 59), 21:387–88.

61. As if to put a telltale mark on the figure, Wu Zixu's headgear shaped like the arabic number 8 (see, e.g., Figs. 4, 5) is distinctively Chu in style; iconographically it resembles the headdress worn by a male figure on a Warring States Chu banner painting. See *Zhongguo meishu quanji: huihua bian* (Complete works of Chinese arts: Paintings), 1, ed. A. Z. Zhang et al., Beijing, 1986, 55, pl. 44. For

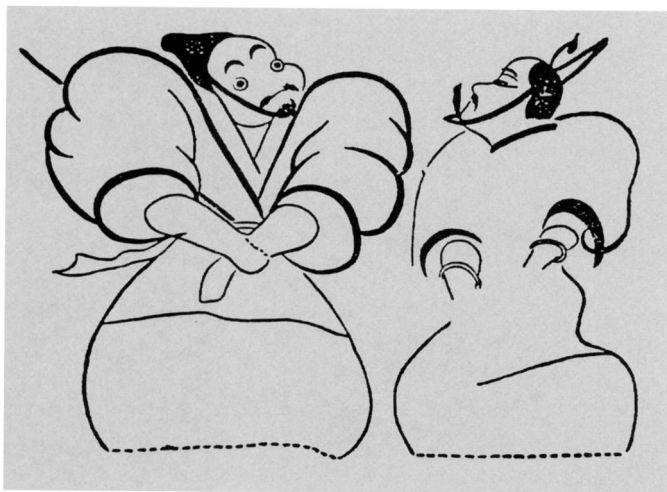
Mirror and Voice: From Dialogue to Monologue

The Chu culture and its Han perpetuation in southern China spawned a rhetorical distinction. Southerners were frequently described as rhetorically endowed. “The south Chu,” so the Grand Historian generalizes in *Shi ji*, “is much given to rhetoric. [People there] are glib and slick” (*SJ*, 129:3268). This may well be a clue to the strikingly peculiar iconography of the suicide on the mirror (Figs. 4–8). All narrative versions existing today—be it *Shi ji* or *Yue jue shu*—make clear the way Wu Zixu dies: it is a suicide.⁶⁴ Earlier or contemporary pictorial representations of suicide do exist. The Nanyang stone carving of Nie Zheng’s suicide is a good example (Fig. 15).⁶⁵ Technical means and a certain pictorial vocabulary were obviously available for a straightforward representation of suicide. The image on the mirror, however, suggests a different interest. The suicide is premised only on the contemporary viewer’s familiarity with the Wu Zixu story. The image is charged with a mood less of a suicide and more of a quarrel. The man is shown holding a sword, raving and raging, ready to charge at some absent opponent. His stance is isolated, yet his posture implies a confrontational pairing. While the king of Wu in one version (Figs. 4–7) may be designated as the opponent, in the Yamaguchi version the opponent is completely absent, a presence only by inference (Fig. 8).

The Yi’an engravings (Fig. 14) provide the compositional scheme implicit in Wu Zixu’s stance as if defying an absent opponent. Structurally, the Yi’an scenes with historical figures have a consistent mise-en-scène: figures are locked in



14 Ink rubbing of stone engraving from the middle chamber of the decorated tomb at Yi’an, a pair of historical figures, ca. 25–220 (from Zeng, *Yi’an guhuaxiang shimu fajue baogao* [Excavation report on an ancient carved stone tomb at Yi’an], Shanghai, 1956, pl. 59, fig. 48)



13 Drawing after painted silk banner from the No. 9 Former Han tomb at Jinqueshan, Linyi, conversing/confronting figures, 2nd century–1st century B.C. (from *Wenwu*, no. 11, 1977, 31, fig. 6)

pairs, a common Han pictorial convention (Figs. 16, 17) characterized by Gu Kaizi (ca. 345–406), an heir to Han art, as a “conversant pairing” (*wu dui*).⁶⁶ The meaning of the term is twofold: it denotes both a figural pairing pattern and its garrulous nature. What is unusual about the Yi’an slabs is their circumscription of the “conversant pairing” within individual frames, thereby giving the motif visual prominence. The paired figures are intensely embroiled in some kind of confrontation, as shown in their agitated gestures and, on some occasions, in the use of swords. These figures are *rhetorical* in terms of both narrative and style: they wrangle with each other; their antagonism is dramatized by sword-bearing and arm-thrusting flourishes, repeated in a number of scenes (Fig. 18). The mood is apparent: anger, animosity, and argumentative intensity. What the Wu Zixu figure’s posturing implies is fully realized and confirmed on the Yi’an slabs. In its echoes of the Yi’an figural structure, the point of the Wu Zixu mirror design seems twofold: it postulates some strong emotional categories; it implies some argumentative subtexts. Rhetoric is an issue.⁶⁷

Rhetoric was in vogue during the Warring States period

documentation of Han headgears, see *HHS*, 30: 3661–78; for a study of Han headgears, see M. Hayashi, *Kandai no bumbutsu* (The cultural relics of Han dynasty), Kyoto, 1976, 47–76.

62. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi*, in *ZZJC*, VIII, 25:149–50.

63. For a comprehensive account of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove and the cultural-historical significance of their portraits, see Spiro (as in n. 36).

64. *LSCQ*, 23:301; *SY*, 9:19; *YJS*, 14:102; *WYCQ*, 3:105.

65. For the story of Nie Zheng, see *SJ*, 86:2522–26.

66. Gu Kaizhi, “Weijin shenliu huazan,” in Zhang Yanyuan (as in n. 27), I, 5:71. The tomb lintel now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 16), and the Le-Lang lacquer basket are good examples of “conversant pairing”; see *Zhongguo meishu quanji: huihua bian* (as in n. 61), 103, pl. 77. For a

discussion of “conversant pairing,” see T. Nagahiro’s article on the Han dynasty figure painting, in *Kandai gasho no kenkyu* (Studies in the pictorial art of the Han dynasty), ed. T. Nagahiro, Tokyo, 1965, 142–47.

67. M. Powers has provided an extended study of the rhetorical aspect of Han art on the basis of a political reading of stylistic properties. See Powers, 184–86, 373.



15 Ink rubbing of a stone carving, *Nie Zheng's Suicide*, ca. 25–220, Nanyang (from Wang and Shan, *Nanyang lianghan*, fig. 138)



16 Lintel and pediment of a tomb from Luoyang, gray earthenware, hollow tiles painted in ink and colors on a white washed ground (detail), 1st century B.C., Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Denman Waldo Ross Collection (photo: courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



17 Ink rubbing of decorated bricks, a pair of figures in conversation or confrontation, Nanyang, ca. 25–220 (from Zhao, *Nanyang*, fig. 43)

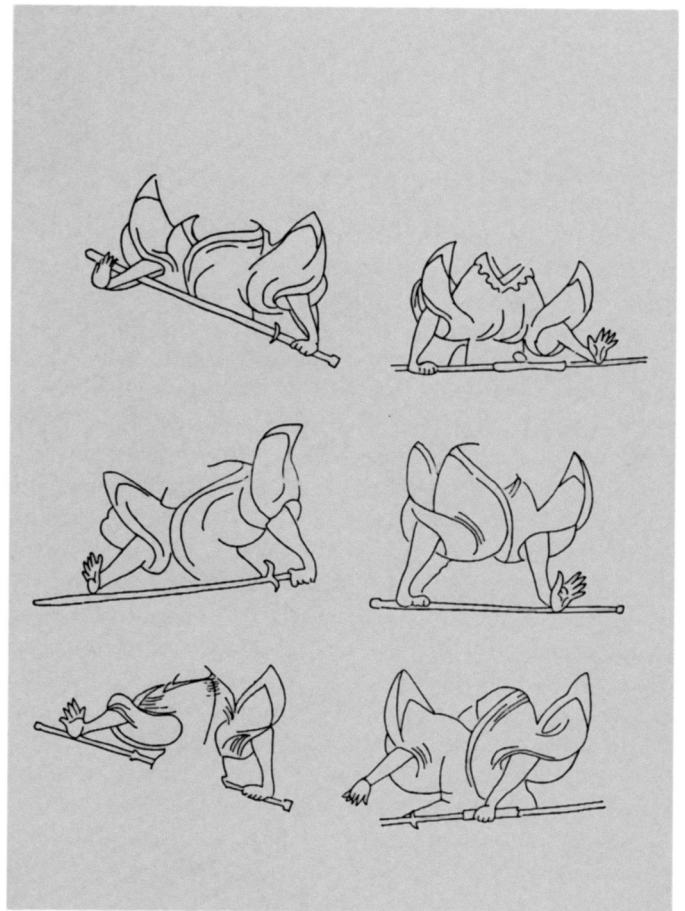
(475–221 B.C.),⁶⁸ and this led to a desire for rhetorical exercises. Exemplary precedents of suasive letters and argued cases were collected and anthologized into various kinds of manuals, chief among them the *Zhangguo ce* (Intrigues of the Warring States); these were in turn widely circulated well into the Han period.⁶⁹

In Han times the art of rhetoric remained a popular pursuit. The *Yi wen zhi* chapter of *Han shu* lists twelve rhetoricians (*zhongheng jia*) whose works total 107 volumes (*pian*) (*HS*, 30:1739). The textual evidence of the rhetorical vogue is matched by the archaeological evidence. The fact that a tomb occupant (Mawangdui Tomb, no. 3) of the Chu region should have been accompanied by a manual of rhetoric (i.e., *Zhangguo ce*) along with the Huanglao Taoist classics indicates the pride of place such books occupied among the Former Han aristocracy and gentry.⁷⁰

68. During the middle of the Warring States period, the hereditary privilege enjoyed by the nobility was invalidated in the wake of legal reforms in the Central Plain states. A bureaucratic hierarchy was established in a way that allowed the kings of the states to appoint prime ministers and generals at will, regardless of the candidates' social background. The candidates, on the other hand, had to vie for the king's appointment by persuasion. The issues at stake were state policies in a confusingly fragmented world. The confrontation between the Chu and Qin, the two most powerful states, occasioned the need common to the concerned states of choosing between two kinds of alliances: either the

vertical alliance along the north-south axis or horizontal alliances. All states were faced with this choice. It consequently fell to the aspiring politicians to persuade their audiences by addressing this primary concern. They thus earned the name of *zhongheng jia*, "specialists in vertical and horizontal matters," synonymous with "rhetoricians." For them, the gentle art of rhetoric involved a spectacular change of fortune and became a means of social mobility.

69. Six of these texts found their way into the Former Han imperial library, where they were sought out by Liu Xiang and edited into a single volume titled *Zhangguo ce* (Intrigues of the Warring



18 Drawing after stone engraving from the decorated tomb at Yi'nan, historical figures, ca. 25–220 (from T. Nagahiro, ed., *Kandai gasho no kenkyo* [Studies in the pictorial art of the Han dynasty], Tokyo, 1965, fig. 8)

Rhetoric, once an art with serious substance whose impact could lead to the survival or destruction of a nation during the Warring States period, lost much of its strategic urgency under the Han. Yet it continued to have appeal. The past glory of the Warring States, when one could effect a sudden change of fortune by capitalizing on the verbal art alone, represented an ideal golden age to the Han gentleman not born with a silver spoon in his mouth or to those who constantly bemoaned the fate of being born in the wrong time. The Grand Historian Sima Qian ends his tale of the two "best rhetoricians" of the Warring States era with a Han moral: the talents need to appear in the right time and the right place (*SJ*, 79:2425).

For the aristocracy, extravagance required extravaganza. When rhetoric loosened its grip on reality, it turned self-indulgent and became a playful pastime. Combined with the

States). On the textual problems of *Zhangguo ce* and its historical background, see K. Yang, "Mawangdui boshu zhangguo zhonghengjia shu de shiliao jiazhi" (The historiographical value of the bamboo book of *Zhangguo ce*), in Hunan Museum, *Mawangdui hanmu yanjiu* (Studies on the Han tombs at Mawangdui), Changsha, 1979, 134. See also J. I. Crump, *Intrigues: Studies of the Chan-kuo tse*, Ann Arbor, 1964.

70. For the manuscript of *Zhangguo ce* excavated from the Han tombs at Mawangdui, Changsha, the core area of the Chu culture, see Hunan Museum (as in no. 69), 133–60.

Chu ci heritage, early rhetoric evolved into the Han rhapsody (*fu*). Those who still diligently exercised in the verbal art were known for being good at rhetoric and rhapsody in the same breath. Han people did not discriminate between the two. "Rhetoric" as a Han period term subsumes both the art of argumentation and the ornamental art of rhymed prose, that is, the rhapsody.⁷¹

One formal feature that Han rhapsody retains from early rhetoric is the argumentative dialogue, a drama of verbal seesaw. In fact, argumentative energy invigorated the whole discourse of the Warring States—an age of polyphony when a hundred schools competed against one another to have their voices heard. Mencius, Moists, and others all provided classical examples of the art of dialogue as a discursive form. Most of the classical texts excavated from the Han tombs from the areas once dominated by the Chu culture have the dialogue form as a principal mode of discourse; they all suggest a strong interest in the match of wits. Dialogic scenarios and argumentative prowess manifested in *Zhangguo ce*—the source heavily drawn upon by the Grand Historian in making his *Shu ji*—shaped the Han imagination about the Warring States history. Han people looked back upon the era as an age of debate. The Han pictorial conversant pairing, if not visually transcribing such a discursive mode, at least made it a prominent pictorial interest, evidenced in the art of the region once dominated by the Chu culture, including the Yi'nan engravings (Fig. 14).⁷² If other Han tombs house manuals of rhetoric,⁷³ the Yi'nan tomb shelters a gallery of rhetoric. The highly charged pictorial scenes of passionate debates, arguments, defying, outwitting, and so on, become the proper *mise-en-scène* of historical representation. History was, to the Han imagination, largely a coaxing, bluffing, insinuating rhetorical battle.⁷⁴ In the beginning was the *word*.

If the Wu Zixu image (Figs. 4–8) is set against the rhetorical backdrop of the Yi'nan engravings—that is, the scenarios of dialogues, of confrontations—the iconography of the wrangling posture makes sense. The drama of Wu Zixu's life was largely a frustrating verbal seesaw with the king of Wu. Here is a man who spent his life advising and admonishing.

What intrigues us, however, is the visual representation of rhetorical stances. The Yi'nan figures are locked in a dialogic paring; the Wu Zixu figure on the mirror is straddled

between the dialogical pairing and a monological stance.⁷⁵ One could view the image in two alternative ways: either as part of an incomplete composition of a dialogic confrontation, or as a self-sufficient stance in its own right. This ambiguous configuration charges the image with a double meaning. Insofar as the Wu Zixu figure partially retains the format of conversant pairing (as in the Yi'nan engravings), this endows the single figure with a garrulous mood: arguing and defying. Insofar as the immediate opponent is only partially suggested in one version (Figs. 4–7) and completely left out in the other (Fig. 8), the pictorial scheme asserts the figure's solo supremacy at the end of the pictorial narrative. In the case of the Yamaguchi mirror (Fig. 8), it takes no more than two scenes to represent the Wu Zixu matter: (1) the confrontation between Wu Zixu and the king of Wu; and (2) Wu Zixu's solo stance. Various design versions point to one thing: a shift from dialogue to monologue.

A corresponding shift of voice occurs in the Qin-Han textual narration of the Wu Zixu matter. The bitter outcry about gouging out Wu Zixu's eyes and hanging them on the gate-tower of Wu is, in an earlier version (*Lushi chunqu*), uttered not by Wu Zixu himself, but by the king of Wu with a tauntingly sarcastic overtone in a dialogic mode:

Zixu was about to die. He said: "If only I could have one eye to see the Yue [army] entering the Wu." He committed suicide. Fuchai took his body and threw it to the river. He also gouged out his eyes and put them over the eastern gate, saying: "You may see Yue people entering my state!" (*LSCQ*, 23:301; my emphasis)

A displacement of voice occurs in *Shi ji*. What used to be uttered by the king of Wu is now articulated by Wu Zixu: "Gouge out *my* eyes and hang them over the gate-tower of Wu, *I* would like to see the Yue army storming the capital of Wu" (*SJ*, 66:2184; my emphasis).⁷⁶ The change of voice in the text illuminates the change in the pictorial narrative. Both the pictorial and the textual narratives suggest a shift in the modality of discourse: from the open-ended debate to "the final say," and from "events telling themselves" to "*ego affirmo*."⁷⁷

The end of narrative is often capped with death, in its literal, metaphorical, or formal sense. The fact that all narratives have a "desire for the end" and that a narrative

71. This duality of Han rhetoric has been suggested by D. R. Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsung*, Cambridge, 1976, ix.

72. About the Chu influence on the Yi'nan region, see Z. Y. Zeng et al., *Yi'nan guhuaxiang shimu fajue baogao* (Excavation report on an ancient carved stone tomb at Yi'nan), Shanghai, 1956, 46.

73. In addition to the *Zhangguo ce* manuscripts excavated from Mawangdui, Changsha, bamboo books of classical texts of various schools of the Warring States period have been unearthed from the Han tombs of the southern Shandong region. The wide assortment of books—including *Sunzi bingfa*, *Sunbin bingfa*, *Liu tao*, *Weihaozi*, *Guanzi*, *Yanzi*, and *Mozi*—from tomb no. 1 at Yinqueshan, Linyi, for instance, suggests the range of the tomb

occupant's interest with a strong emphasis on political intrigues and military tactics. What is revealing is that the *discursive form* of these books is *consultation*: the eloquent wise men advise the rulers. These books point to a whole rhetorical culture of a bygone era when wise men advised, admonished, and dictated the will of the ruler who listened with an eager ear. Consequently they are in dialogue form. Some of the books, notably *Yanzi*, are collections of rhetorical virtuosity. See Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Science, *Xin Zhongguo de kaogu faxian he yanjiu* (Archaeological excavations and researches in New China), Beijing, 1984, 419–21.

74. Like *Zhangguo ce*, which is rather loose with historical accuracy, Yi'nan tomb slabs are loose with

historical "facts." Anachronism abounds. See Zeng et al. (as in n. 72), 23.

75. The exact dates of the Yi'nan engravings and the Wu Zixu mirror design are uncertain. My formulation of the development from the dialogical *mise-en-scène* to monological posture is therefore not premised on an assumed chronology of the Yi'nan engravings preceding the Wu Zixu design, but rather takes the Yi'nan engravings as a typical instance of the dialogical *mise-en-scène* which goes back at least to the Former Han, as evidenced in the pictorial scenes on the painted lintel and pediment of a Former Han tomb (Fig. 16) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. See J. Fontein and T. Wu, *Unearthing China's Past*, Boston, 1973, 96–100, no. 40.

76. My emphasis. An almost identical exclamation

derives its ultimate meaning from a “postmortem” retrospective vantage point has led to the claim that “all narrative may be in essence obituary.”⁷⁸ A narrative of history henceforth is tantamount to a representation of death or even “as death,” and “death as hermeneutics.”⁷⁹ Narratively, it is what appears on the Wu Zixu mirror. Visually, it is not: the furious man refuses to let go; he burns, raves, and rages. It is a visual representation of a voice which embodies the act of telling, hence the point of view. In this way, the Wu Zixu image attains three levels of symbolic meaning: first, it marks death, hence the “postmortem” retrospective stance—the *telos*—from which the whole historical unfolding up to that point derives its meaning; second, it marks a voice—the utterance of “*ego affirmo*”—from whose point of view history is told; third, history ends with Wu Zixu, which is to say, he is the end of history.

This was what happened in historical writing in Han times. Two major monumental histories—*Shi ji* (Records of the Historian) and *Han shu* (History of the Former Han)—end with the historian’s autobiography as the last chapter. Such a conceit—in the double sense of the word—was also internalized in the iconographic program of Later Han funerary art. On the east wall of the Wu Liang Shrine, which the gentleman Wu Liang (A.D. 77–151) designed for himself, is a panoramic representation of human history. It starts with the creators of cosmos and the dawn of mankind; it ends with the historian’s “self-portrait”: an ox-drawn carriage belonging to Wu Liang himself going in the direction along which history unfolds.⁸⁰ Likewise, Zhao Qi, a Later Han gentleman, designed his own funerary structure by painting a self-portrait among the historical figures he revered.⁸¹ The act signified a revision of history with Zhao Qi the designer of history “in the host’s position” (*HHS*, 4:2124), the “I” who narrated all.

The Wu Zixu image belongs to the type in which the Han historian Ban Gu deciphers “a self-aggrandizing trait” in his verbal portrait of the Madman of Chu.⁸² Such a “self-aggrandizing” visage would allow the Later Han gentleman to see his own image. In this sense, the image of Wu Zixu amounts to a psychological self-portrait for the Later Han gentleman of culture. The period has rightly been celebrated for “the rise of the cultured gentleman’s new-found self-consciousness.”⁸³ Now, dealing with a mirror and the problem of self-discovery brings to mind the Lacanian formula according to which the Wu Zixu mirror could be considered

as a condensed symbolic scenario that embodies a historical experience encompassing three stages: the *mirror* stage, in which the “child” discovers its image through an other in the mirror; the *imaginary*, in which the child assumes a dualistic relation with the mirror image; and the *symbolic* entrance into language through which the “I” is finally uttered.⁸⁴ The mirror flaunts the image of a self; it has a voice.

Mirror and Catharsis: The *Tristes Tropiques* of Loyalty

Han rhetoric could be a deadly affair. That the Wu Zixu image is caught between dialogue and monologue stems from the tension of early Chinese political reality. A crucial activity in imperial court life was admonition and remonstrance (*jian*). *Shuo yuan* (a garden of discourse) catalogues five modes of *jian*, which suggests how this display of loyalty had impinged on the sensibility of the time (*SY*, 9:1). Han ethics demanded that a loyalist remonstrate at the cost of his life; or rather, loyalty was better defined by a willingness to admonish with a prospect of sacrificing one’s life for the well-being of the state. The subtlety lies in the strategy of decorum: persistent but tactful, ready to offend but not to appear offensive. *Li ji* (Book of rites), for instance, urges that one should “take orders without resentment; mildly admonish without fatigue; and suffer without grievance.”⁸⁵ *Fengsu tongyi* registers a popular wisdom: “To admonish bluntly and crudely is a great crime.”⁸⁶ Meanwhile, *Shuo yuan* declares: “fearing death without remonstrance is disloyalty” (*SY*, 9:2). The dilemma is apparent: “not to remonstrate jeopardizes the king; to admonish persistently jeopardizes one’s own life” (*SY*, 9:1). It is not surprising that in remonstrating with their kings and articulating their own desires, Han courtiers typically prefaced their speeches by evoking the tragic martyrdom of Wu Zixu and then proceeded to dwell upon their own agenda or predicament (*SJ*, 118:3085–86; *HS*, 77:3250). If the occasion was so grave as to call for a more deadly rhetoric, the determined courtier would “unsheath his sword and cut his own throat under the northern gate,” striking terror and pity in the heart of the beholders (*HS*, 77:3248). Thus was a persuasive argument made. Han people called such an act “remonstration through [one’s own] corpse” (*shu jian*).⁸⁷

In the narrative context, Wu Zixu died as a result of his remonstrance. Consequently, the mirror inscription pronounces the image to be the “Loyal Minister Wu Zixu” (Figs.

appears in *SY*, 9:19; see also *WYQC*, 3:101. The *YJS* version is slightly different in wording, but fiercer in mood: “Hang high my head so that it will see the Yue people enter Wu and our king and kin reduced to beasts” (14:102).

77. L. Marin, “Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds*,” in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. N. Bryson, Cambridge, 1988, 72–73.

78. P. Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot: A Model for Narrative,” in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, New York, 1985, 90–112.

79. Marin (as in n. 77), 86, 88; and J. L. Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago, 1993, 292. For a general theory about historiography and death, see R. Barthes, *Michelet*,

trans. R. Howard, New York, 1987, 80. See Wu, 213–17.

81. For discussion of this case and the role of the literati in funerary monument design, see M. Powers, “Pictorial Art and Its Public in Early Imperial China,” *Art History*, vii, no. 2, June 1984, 146–49; Powers, 108–110; and Wu, 216–17.

82. Ban Gu, “Preface to *Lisao*,” in *CC*, 1:30.

83. Y. S. Yu’s construction of the rise of the literati’s new-found self-consciousness is extremely pertinent here. See Y. S. Yu, “Han Jin zhiji shi zhi xinzijue yu xinsichao” (The new self-consciousness and new intellectual trends among the cultured gentlemen in late Han and early Jin), in *Shi yu zhongguo wenhua* (Cultured gentlemen and Chinese culture), Shanghai, 1987, 287–400. See also *Cambridge History of China*, 643–46.

84. H. Adams and L. Searle, “Jacques Lacan,” in *Critical Theory since 1965*, Tallahassee, 1986, 733.

85. *Li ji* (Book of rites), ed. S. J. Ye, Shanghai, 1926, 11:155.

86. Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi* (Records of customs), *Sibu beryao* edition, 4:1.

87. “To remonstrate in person during life and to remonstrate through the corpse in death—[such conduct] may be termed upright”; *Han shih waichuan* [*Hanshi wazhuan*]: *Han Ying’s Illustrations of the Didactic Application of the Classic of Songs*, annotated and trans. J. R. Hightower, Cambridge, Mass., 1952, 246. For a discussion of the political wisdom of suicide, see Schneider, 22–23, 26–27.

4–8). Here, presumably, is loyalty writ large. What is jarring, however, is the juxtaposition of the inscription of “loyal minister” and the image of Wu Zixu. Though we do not know what a standard court portrait of a loyal minister in the act of admonition looks like, we are familiar with the scenario of bowing figures (presumably ministers and courtiers) in profile attending a frontally seated, stout figure of sovereignty from the court homage scene in the Wu Liang Shrine.⁸⁸ The kind of solemn imperial ritual decorum pictured in that scene is absent in the mirror design. The mirror inscription points to a *conceptual* category of loyalty, only to have a *pictorial* category of rancor as its visual transcription. Obviously not just a simple rancor, but rancor of a specific kind—one that is related to matters of loyalty. To begin with, Wu Zixu’s loyalty was not uncontested.

There is great loyalty, secondary loyalty, inferior loyalty, and there is treason to the state. Enveloping a prince with the True Way so as to reform him constitutes great loyalty. Stirring up a prince with virtue so as to assist him constitutes secondary loyalty. Holding up the right to censure the wrong so as to provoke the prince constitutes inferior loyalty. . . . Such a relation as that of the duke of Chou to King Ch’eng can be called one of great loyalty. That of Kuan Chung to Duke Huan can be called one of secondary loyalty. That of [Wu] Tzu-hsu to Fu-Ch’ai can be called one of inferior loyalty.⁸⁹

As an exemplary figure of loyalty, Wu Zixu was differently regarded by different commentators. Both *Lushi chunqiu* and *Shuo yuan*, for instance, present a moralizing, orthodox view. The episode narrating the Wu Zixu matter goes under the title of “straightforward counseling” (*zhijian*) in the former (*LSCQ*, 23:300–301) and “frontal counseling” (*zhengjian*) in the latter (*SY*, 9:17–20). Both are rather unsubtle in tone. The moral is simple: one proves one’s loyalty by admonishing the king at the risk of severe punishment. The moral was pushed to an extreme by orthodox teaching: only by sacrificing one’s life in admonishing the stubborn king could one show one’s ultimate loyalty. There lies the controversial nature of Wu Zixu: he died in a protest against the king’s blindness. Orthodox texts treat it as only a passing matter; Later Han southern texts—*Wu Yue chunqu* and *Yue jue shu*—make much of this rankling bitterness. The Han imitation of *Chu ci* best articulated the complex moral overtones and the poignant mood implicit in *Wu Yue chunqu* and *Yue jue shu*. The foregoing discussions of the Chu madman prototype and the Chu rhapsody converge here: is there such a thing as the *chu* kind of rancor or rhapsodic idiom of loyalty? What does loyalty in the southern accent mean?

88. Wu (197) has identified the homage scene as depicting the imperial court and the image of the seated stout figure as “a standardized portrait of a Han emperor, in particular that of Gaozu, the founder of the dynasty.”

89. *Han shih wai chuan* (as in n. 87), 127.

90. In his preface to *Chu ci zhang ju*, Wang Yi affirms the parallel between Qu Yuan and Wu Zixu: “[Qu Yuan] takes loyalty as the highest [value], and values the maintenance of integrity. [Qu Yuan]

therefore used bold words to preserve his state; he killed himself to achieve Righteousness (*ren*). He was like Wu Zixu who was not averse to having his body floated on the river”; Wang Yi, “*Chu ci zhang ju xu*” (Preface to the Song of Chu), in *CC*, 1:28; trans. cited from Schneider, 28.

91. See H. Wilhelm, “The Scholar’s Frustration: Notes on a Type of *Fu*,” in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, Chicago, 1957, 310–19; and Schneider, 17–47.

Wu Zixu is often cited in the *Chu ci* and its Han rhapsodic imitations as Qu Yuan’s alter ego.⁹⁰ Among Han followers of Qu Yuan, the emotional bonding between Qu Yuan and Wu Zixu became a poetic conceit. The parallel between the two draws not only on their similar fate of spurned loyalty, but also on the poignancy of their similar tragic ends of “floating down the river.” The Han *Chu ci* poets, assuming the voice of Qu Yuan in their imaginary exile and quest, would typically evoke Wu Zixu as the mirror image of their own fate. They would even make an imaginary pilgrimage to the Wu region to pay homage to Wu Zixu (“I crossed in a willow boat over to Kuaiji”; *CC*, 16:192–93). Thus, whatever constitutes loyalty in *Chu ci* applies to Wu Zixu. Grasping what loyalty means in *Chu ci* is relevant to understanding the inscription “Loyal Minister” on the Wu Zixu mirror.

Loyalty in *Chu ci* is merely the tip of the iceberg. The topos of *Chu ci* is not the confession of loyalty; it is the consequence of loyalty. Being rejected and spurned, suffering enmity and isolation, and choking with pent-up grievances and melancholy—these are the consequences of loyalty and hence points of poetic interest worthy of a labored emotional rhetoric. What begins as a means of evocation of loyalty often ends with melancholy and bitterness: “Scrupulous in honesty, he will not compromise./Zixu protested and lost his life;/Bi Gan was loyal, but had his heart cut out” (*CC*, 13:150). The “loyal but” pattern is the essential syntax of *Chu ci* pathos. Loyalty is evoked, the heart sinks. Wu Zixu is hardly mentioned in the Han *Chu ci* without a heavy sigh over his tragic death (“I mourn for Tzu Hsu’s care”; *CC*, 13:150). Loyalty then becomes a figure of speech, a pivot around which cluster various emotional categories: poignancy, self-pity, melancholy, and grievance. The essential pathos is that of *yuan*, a broad yet compact category ranging from resentment and bitterness to complaint and rancor.⁹¹

What I do resent [*yuan*] is the Fair One’s waywardness:
Because he will never look to see what is in men’s
hearts. (*CC* 1:8).

I grieve [*yuan*] for the high hopes of days gone by,
And sorrow for those that are yet to come. (*CC*, 4:94)

Resenting [*yuan*] the prince, sorrowful, I forget to
return.

You think of me, and are restless. (*CC*, 2:47)

The Later Han *Chu ci zhang ju* is full of *yuan*: Dongfang Shuo has “*Yuan shi* (Disgust at the world)” and “*Yuan si* (Embittered thoughts)” in his “Seven Remonstrances”; Liu Xiang has “*Yuan si* (Embittered thoughts)” in his “Nine Laments”; Wang Yi has “*Yuan shang* (Resentment against the ruler)” in his “Nine Longings.” Loyalty establishes the narrative sce-

92. For the mirror excavated at Changsha, see *Changsha fajue baogao* (as in n. 54), 116, pl. 68.3. One version of the inscription was recorded by Nicolaas Witsen (1641–1717), a Dutch scholar and diplomat, in his *Noord en Oost Tartaryen*, privately printed in Amsterdam in 1692, 337–38. The inscription has captured the imagination of nearly all scholars interested in bronze mirrors, including Z. Y. Luo, S. C. Liang, B. Karlgren, P. Yetts, and L. S. Yang. The version cited here is a composite text translated by W. P. Yetts and based on two inscrip-

nario of rejection and exile, *yuan* fills the scenario with emotive substances. Loyalty is the cause, *yuan* the effect. In the *Chu ci* setting, one hardly evokes loyalty without plunging into *yuan*. This rhetorical structure is essential for understanding the “loyalty” illustrated in the Wu Zixu mirror. It reads as *yuan*.

The motif of *yuan* is internal to the tradition of southern mirror decoration. A type of mirror excavated from Changsha and dating from the late Former Han bears the inscription:

Untarnished brightness at your service, Sir,
Lest gloom should dim the light;
[I speak] else benefits ensuing from this magic alloy
Be forgotten with the lapse of time.
Even though my fair qualities endure unchanged,
The false intrigues of others may yet win your favor.
By virtue of its intrinsic purity [this mirror] reflects the
light;
Its radiance is like that of the sun and moon.
My heart aspires to prove its loyalty;
But it is thwarted and has no vent.⁹²

The inscription, a formula common on Han bronze mirrors, encompasses three different concerns related to the Wu Zixu mirror: the relevance of *Chu ci* rhapsody, the implications of loyalty, and the self-referential use of the mirror. The fact that a *Chu ci*-styled poem was inscribed on a mirror at all suggests the currency of *Chu ci* mannerism as a marked social taste in Han times. “Since the death of Qu Yuan,” as Wang Yi (fl. 114–19) of the Later Han wrote about the unabated *Chu ci* vogue, “distinguished scholars and sophisticated gentlemen, when writing poems and rhapsodies, would invariably imitate Qu Yuan’s manner, pattern themselves after his model, draw on his intricacies and take after his ornamental texture” (CC, 1:28). The Wu region seems to have been particularly affected. The cultural history of the region, according to the Han historian Ban Gu, could best be formulated by a retrospective account of the perpetuation of the Qu Yuan lore and reception of *Chu ci*.

In the beginning, the sage minister Qu Yuan was slandered and exiled. He made a number of *sao*-styled rhapsodies for self-lamentation. Song Yu, Tang Le, Yan Fuzi followed suit, and made their names by admiring and repeating Qu Yuan. With the rise of Han, Wu was ruled by Pi, nephew of [Han emperor] Gaozu, who attracted the wandering talents from the world. Hence the medley of

Mei Cheng, Zou Yang, Yan Fuzi who flourished during the period of Wen and Jing reigns. Meanwhile, [Liu] An, prince of Huainan, with his capital in Shouchun, hosted guest scholars to write books. The Wu boasted of Yan Zhu and Zhu Maichen, prominent nobility of the Han dynasty and dazzling in their literary and rhetorical accomplishment. *Chu ci* is therefore perpetuated. It is excessively ingenious but lacks credibility. (HS, 28:1668)

Mirror inscriptions are clichés and formulas, yet they neatly codify otherwise raw experiences and indicate how the welter of period sentiments was ordered. Inscribing a *Chu ci*-style poem on a southern mirror suggests the fossilization of a literary taste into a pattern of thought and a processed sensibility: evoking loyalty would automatically prompt melancholy. Learning *Chu ci* was to learn how to curse one’s lot.

Consequently, the loyalty issue becomes no more than a topos. The inscription on the *Chu ci*-styled mirror can hardly be understood as a pledge of loyalty to the court. It is intransitive: melancholy à la mode, for melancholy does not necessarily result from a failed remonstrance and spurned loyalty—after all, how many Han gentlemen would have had the chance to remonstrate with the court? Loyalty à la Qu Yuan was a trope. So was Wu Zixu.

Such tropes were frequently put to rhetorical use in pictorial form. Han palace and temple walls were often adorned with murals depicting, among other things, historical figures.⁹³ There were a number of Wu Zixu temples (*miao*) and shrines (*ci*) built in Han and Jin periods in what used to be the Chu and Wu territory.⁹⁴ At times a temple would be erected in the names of both Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan.⁹⁵ The Later Han use of these temples is rather revealing. A Later Han gentleman of Nanyang named Yan Du was imprisoned for involvement in “partisan matters” and died at home; “the local people painted his image on [the wall] of the Qu Yuan temple” (HHS, 64:752).⁹⁶ A mute structure, the monument spoke volumes. The act was not commemorating Qu Yuan as a paragon of loyalty; it simply drew on the rich expressive repertoire of the *Chu ci* sentiment monumentalized in the temple. It was one way of turning on the elegiac pathos—something automatically turned on by a run-of-the-mill *Chu ci*-style pattern of thought. A similar use of the Wu Zixu image could well have happened: less than 200 miles southwest from Nanyang there was a “Qu Yuan/Wu [Zi]xu Temple”;⁹⁷ about 200 miles northeast of Nanyang was a Wu Zixu temple with a stela dating from A.D. 235.⁹⁸

A mirror is a more personal medium than public temples and shrines. If painting a martyr’s image on a Qu Yuan temple provides some effective *tristes tropiques*, then inscribing the *Chu ci*-style rhetoric on bronze mirrors would charge

tions listed by Karlgren as nos. 83 and 84. See Karlgren (as in n. 13), 25; Yetts (as in n. 15), 23–24; and L. S. Yang, “An Inscribed Han Mirror Discovered in Siberia,” *T’oung Pao*, XLII, 1962, 334.

93. The mural covering the Hall of Numinous Brilliance in Lu recorded in a rhapsody by a mid-2nd-century gentleman is a good example. See *Wen xuan* (as in n. 25), 275.

94. Their remains and ruins are recorded in Li

Daoyuan (A.D. 466–527), *Shuying zhu* (Annotated Canon of Waterways). See *Shuying zhushu* (Annotated Canon of Waterways with further commentary), ed. S. J. Yang (1839–1915) et al., Nanjing, 1989, 5:421, 24:2041, 30:2512, 40:3300.

95. Yu Zhongyong, a writer of the Jin dynasty (A.D. 266–420), reports in *Jingzhou ji* (Records of the Jing Prefecture) his sighting of the remains of the Qu Yuan/Wu Zixu temple (*miao*) in Zigui County of the Jing Prefecture, now in northern Hubei. Yu’s

book is lost, but the relevant passage is preserved in *Yiwen leiyu* (Classified collectanea of arts and writings), compiled by Ouyang Xun in A.D. 622, Shanghai, 1982, 64:1143.

96. Powers (350–51) has examined the rhetorical use of the Qu Yuan temple in the Yan Du case, thereby revealing the relationship between political oppression and artistic display.

97. Yu Zhongyong, *Jingzhou ji*, in *Yiwen leiyu* (as in n. 95), 64:1143.

98. *Shuying zhushu* (as in n. 94), 5:421.

the medium with an equally cathartic function. Casting the trope—the rancorous Wu Zixu image—on a bronze mirror has the same effect. “It is in the very nature of man,” wrote two Later Han scholars from the Wu area, authors of *Yue jue shu*, confessing their motive behind rewriting the Wu Zixu story, “that he would not write when he is at peace. Impoverished, he would curse his lot [*yuan hen*]; resentful, he would write, in the same way a poet out of a job would resent, turn melancholy, sigh, and write poems” (*YJS*, 1:3). One may sigh for a martyrdom such as that of Wu Zixu’s; or one may sigh, through Wu Zixu, simply for being out of employment. Sighing is a private language. One learned from *Chu ci* and Han rhapsody as public discourse how to sigh for private woes. It is hard to imagine the Wu Zixu mirror not causing these people to sigh. “At the sight of the loyal vassals dying for their principles,” wrote a third-century gentleman, “who would not harden his own resolve, and who would not sigh at beholding banished ministers and persecuted sons?”⁹⁹ After sighing, what the Grand Historian called the “rankling in the heart” would be ventilated (*SJ*, 130:3300).

Such is the case with Liang Song, a learned gentleman of Later Han and member of the famous Liang clan, who was sent into exile because of his brother’s involvement in partisan politics. He found himself “*on the southern soil*” (my emphasis). Prompted by the historical associations surrounding the Dongting Lake and his own unhappy circumstances, he composed an elegy for Wu Zixu and Qu Yuan, tied the poem with a stone, and sank it in the lake. The elegy has all the generic trappings of rhapsody: evoking the pathos of Wu Zixu’s death; loyalty at the expense of one’s life; the elegiac sighing (“Even though you [Wu Zixu] swallow the sword to submit to the order, / Your gouged eyes wide open over the city gate; / The deserted grass of Wu is already fully grown”); and the typical ending with a note of bitterness.¹⁰⁰

What is most interesting about Liang Song’s rhapsody is, however, its *evocation of a mirror* (“Looking at the ancient mirror that is available”), following its sigh for Wu Zixu (*HHS*, 34:420–21). Although Liang Song was probably evoking a metaphorical mirror and using the Wu Zixu story as a historical moral, a bronze mirror bearing the Wu Zixu story would have accommodated well such a history-as-moral rhapsodic urge. Had Liang Song seen the actual mirror (whether he had the actual mirror in mind we do not know), it is hard to imagine any other way in which he would have responded to the mirror design. Moreover, such an urge to see an “ancient mirror” bearing the Wu Zixu matter would have been answered by the mirror designers sensitive to market needs and patrons’ moods. Here may well be the *raison d’être* of the Wu Zixu mirror.

The Han court did indeed promote didactic art for the moral teaching of loyalty. But images—when they are powerful—do not preach; they inspire and arouse, while the emotions aroused may be morally confusing and confused. The Wu Zixu mirror shows the Later Han popular historical imagination at its crudest. But it is precisely when historical and moral complexity is reduced to a crude form that it allows for an internal shift of meaning and varying shades of subtlety. Wu Zixu as the epitome of loyalty remains here a pale and shadowy concept, something to be recollected—that is to say, *de facto*, to be forgotten; Wu Zixu as rancor writ

large, an icon of resentment, stays. “I look in the mirror,” as a modern wit puts it, “and see a stranger who swears that it is me.”¹⁰¹ Such would be the Later Han gentleman’s experience.

Mirror and Physiognomy: The Air of Valor

Seeing oneself in the mirror here actually means how the public wants to see itself. The Han viewer comes to the mirror with predisposed expectations. Further, seeing one’s mirror image is a cultural skill. It involves “the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the viewer.”¹⁰² One such perceptual skill of discrimination is the Han disposition toward physiognomy.

The Han culture had much use for physiognomy. *Han shu* records twenty-four volumes of books on the subject (*HS*, 30:1774). The art of physiognomy is summarized as “tracing the bone structure and proportional measurement of human and animals . . . for a revelation of the nobility and baseness, auspiciousness and omen of their temperament” (*HS*, 30:1775). Each year, the girls selected for the imperial harem were screened by a physiognomist with regard to appearance, complexion, hair, and so forth (*HHS*, 10:400). When a Han military general was fighting on the frontier, the court summoned his mother and wife and had a physiognomist read their features to detect possible intimations of death or loss (*HS*, 54:2455). Ban Chao was told by a physiognomist that he had a “swallow’s chin and tiger’s neck,” which meant that he could “fly and eat meat. This is the physiognomy of a duke who reigns ten thousand *li*” (*HHS*, 47:1571). Such accounts are numerous in early texts. We are not inclined to take them too seriously, but the Han people did. Even a skeptic like Wang Chong, who in his devastating *Lun heng* (*Disquisitions*) dismissed many popular beliefs held by his contemporaries as superstitious, subscribed to this kind of physiognomy: “Human life is heavenly endowed, therefore one’s body has symptoms. A scrutiny of one’s symptomatic appearance would tell one’s fate” (*LH*, 11:23).

The Han physiognomic reading could at times be very analytical. Such categories as “swallow’s chin and tiger’s neck” point to localized anatomic features—in this case, the chin and neck, their metaphorical analogies notwithstanding. Since no manual of Han physiognomy is available to us, it is hard to apply Han theory to the Wu Zixu image, whose distinctive features make it susceptible to a physiognomic reading.

Average Han people were equipped with a watered-down version of physiognomy rather than the exacting skills of a professional physiognomist. One of the central operating categories was an impressionable grasp of some *qi* (inner spirit). “One derives one’s *qi* from heaven,” writes Wang Chong, “Once one is invigorated with *qi*, one’s physical frame is formed. One is blessed with some life-long physiognomic features. Even after one dies, the form would not change” (*LH*, 7:14). One of the character traits considered most admirable during the Han period is embodied in the notion of *qiyie* (inner nobility or air of valor). It started as a moral trait; yet it developed into a behavior pattern to the extent that the Han eye could identify certain outward

appearances and mannerisms as manifestations of the inner *qijie*. One Later Han gentleman was praised for his “heavenly endowed nature, with noble ambitions and flawless deeds” to the extent that even in childhood his “appearance registered a trait of glamorous valor” (*lie jie*).¹⁰³ This physiognomic interest, absent in other early textual narratives of the Wu Zixu matter, is put into effect in *Wu Yue chungqu*, a Later Han southern text. It relates that when Wu Zixu first came to the state of Wu, he wore long hair and had his face smeared with dirt to conceal his identity. An officer “good at physiognomy” first recognized the anonymous talent in disguise/distress and made a recommendation to the king of Wu. Wu Zixu’s first interview with the king began with a physiognomic observation (*WYCQ*, 1:28–29). He is described as possessing an “air (*qi*) of valor and robustness which suggests a lust for revenge” and “the in-between of his eyebrows measures one *che*” (*WYCQ*, 1:29). Such a Later Han verbal portrait of Wu Zixu’s physiognomy reveals a working principle of Han physiognomy: that there is a connection between a certain configuration of features and a character disposition.¹⁰⁴ Such a physiognomy could well have been put to work in the design of the Wu Zixu image on the mirror (Figs. 4–8).

There was a popular cult of such an “air of valor” in Han times. It originated with a group of people known as the wandering knights, or “knight-errants” (*you xia*), as noted by Lien-sheng Yang:

These people were first recognized as a group during the period of the Warring States. At that time, the old feudal order had disintegrated, and many hereditary warriors had lost their positions and titles. As brave and upright individuals, and joined by strong sons of lower origin, they scattered throughout the country and made a living by offering their services (and even their lives) to anyone who could afford to employ them. The knight-errants were distinguished by their absolute reliability, which was their professional virtue.¹⁰⁵

Despite the Han government’s attempts to curb the knights’ activities, the vogue of chivalry went unabated. Daredevils such as Yu Rang, Nie Zheng, Jing Ke, and Hou Ying commanded a popular following, which grew enormously under the Later Han.

The circumstantial and psychological forces prompting such a vogue were complex. It may have been spurred by the allure of the recommendation system. A special category of “singular deeds” (*duxing ke*) was added to the range of

eligibility for an official career under the Later Han—a category that solicited candidates with a reputation for single-minded commitment, the audacity to attempt the impossible, or the accomplishment of unusually daunting tasks. Accordingly, in *Hou Han shu*, brave deeds are classified in the chapter “Singular Deeds” (*du xing*), a new category of characterization peculiar to *Hou Han shu* (History of the Later Han) and unknown to either *Shu ji* (Records of the Historian) or *Han shu* (History of the Former Han). The chapter gives numerous accounts of, among other things, brave suicides, the graphic scenarios of individuals who “pressed against the sword and died” (*HHS*, 81:2665–702). The cult of an “air of valor” entailed a corollary: the defiance of death in a display of braggadocio. A man named Li Ye, for example, took poison as a way of refusing to serve a rebel general. Emperor Guangwu had a portrait made in his memory (*HHS*, 81: 2607.). Refusing to serve Wang Mang, a certain Wang Jia “pressed against the sword and died in front of the messenger” (*HHS*, 81:2670). Such bravado, whether affected or spontaneous, once entrenched became an internalized compulsion and an enduring trait.

On a deeper social and psychological level, the vogue for daredevil gallantry may have been a reaction against the oppressive reality of the bloody feuds between the consort families and the eunuchs or between different cliques that had serious consequences for the Later Han gentlemen: the choosing of sides and formation of alliances. With the imperial pendulum constantly swinging, one’s life was constantly at stake. Alliance with either side subjected one to an inevitable purge. Being an absolute loyalist to the young emperor without pledging allegiance to either the consort families or the eunuchs risked a double jeopardy. Refusal to take official posts could also lead to persecution. Purges, persecutions, and suicides were the order of the day.¹⁰⁶ A response to this reign of terror was the nurturing of some psychological mechanism: the character trait of keeping up an “air of valor,” a single-minded allegiance to a particular patron or a transcending moral principle with a defiance for any other authority, the cult of self-righteousness as a means of adhering to righteousness (*ren*),¹⁰⁷ and a readiness for death at the slightest provocation with a stylish flamboyance and bravura.¹⁰⁸

The circumstances prompting the cultivation of such an “air of valor” may well have been complex; but the attitude that had gradually taken shape outlasted specific circumstances and fossilized into what Emile Durkheim called a *conscience collective* and a sanctioned social taste for a particular character trait,¹⁰⁹ widely admired and imitated, with little

99. Bush and Shih, 28.

100. Liang Song’s straitened circumstances provide a personal context to his rhapsody: “Having grown up in the capital, he did not enjoy the local region. With his talents passing unappreciated, he turned melancholy. Once he climbed high and sighed: a great man should live as a feudal lord and die as [worthy of] shrine-sacrificial attendance. Or else one might as well retire into leisure and be content with poetry and classics as self-entertainment. . . . He had three sons and three daughters” (*HHS*, 34:421).

101. P. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred, Minneapolis, 1987, 61.

102. Baxandall, 1972 (as in n. 42), 34.

103. Cai Yong, “Fan Dan bei” (Stela inscription for Fan Dan), in *Langhan sanguo wenhu* (Collection of writings from the Han and Three Kingdom periods), ed. Y. Lin, Taipei, 1960, 2228.

104. A similar but earlier physiognomic instance appears in the rhapsody of Mei Cheng (d. 140 B.C.): “The masculine (*yang*) air found between the eyebrows spreads to cover his whole visage”; Mei Cheng, *Qi fa* (Seven stimuli), Beijing, 1959, 48.

105. L. S. Yang, “The Concept of ‘Pao’ as a Basis for Social Relations in China,” in Fairbank, ed. (as in n. 91), 294.

106. C. Y. Chen, *Hsun Yueh (A.D. 148–209): The Life and Reflections of an Early Medieval Confucian*, Cambridge, 1975, 10ff; and *Cambridge History of China*, 796–97.107. *Cambridge History of China*, 804–6.

108. For a discussion of the Later Han cult of “air of valor” (*qiye*), see Zhao Yi (1727–1814), *Ershier shi zhaji pao zheng* (Notes on the Twenty-four Histories with annotations), annotated by S. M. Wang, Beijing, 1984, 102–4.

109. For a good explication of Durkheim’s theory of *conscience collective*, see A. Giddens, “Introduction: Durkheim’s Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy,” in *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, ed. A. Giddens, Cambridge, 1972, 5–8.



19 Ink rubbings of a stone carving, *The Suicide of Three Knights over Two Peaches*, Nanyang, ca. 25–220 (from Wang and Shan, *Nanyang lianghan*, fig. 141)

regret even when it led to punishment or death.

This “air of valor” is registered as one of the distinctive moods of Han pictorial art, confirmed by the wide popularity of representations of Jing Ke’s assassination of the king of Qin, Nie Zhen’s gallant suicide (Fig. 15), and a tale about three knights committing suicide for two peaches (Fig. 19). This is also the mood manifested in the Wu Zixu figure’s defiant posture, with a furiously tilted head and wild, wide-open eyes staring at his opponent, thrusting his left arm forward.

Other iconographic contexts in which this gesture appears combine to shed light on the physiognomic trait of the Wu Zixu image. A carved stone slab at Baizhuang shows a narrative scene involving some authorities giving orders and a man being sent to execution (Fig. 12). The arm-thrusting gesture belongs to the authoritarian figures: it has a commanding overtone. In a Nanyang stone carving representing a bullfight (Fig. 11), the arm-thrusting gesture is a way of engaging the animal: it involves danger. So the gesture conveys a commanding and combative tone and a grave seriousness that may suggest an involvement in matters of life and death. These qualities charge the Wu Zixu image with a sense of moral superiority and an air of defiance at the ominous approach of death. Han people would respond to such images in terms of their physiognomic categories, a certain “air of valor,” for instance. An image like this was fashioned, not because the Later Han imagination captured the historical truth surrounding Wu Zixu, but because the image had a cogency for the Later Han period.

The Wu Zixu image on the mirror could thus easily translate into contemporary scenarios. Dai Jiu, a Later Han man from the area where the Wu Zixu mirror was produced, was imprisoned for his superior’s suspected “embezzlement” and was tortured. Scorched axes were forced under his arms. Dai Jiu remained composed, “his color unchanged.” “Keep the ax hot,” he urged his torturers, “don’t let it cool off.” Refusing to eat and drink, he would pick up from the ground

the burned chunks of flesh which had dropped from his own body and eat them. After a night of being forced to inhale the smoke of burnt horse-manure and assumed dead, he once again shocked others with his “wide-open eyes and loud curses” (*HHS*, 71:2691; my emphasis). Such an act of bravado and display of an “air of valor” would have been neatly paralleled by a visual formulation such as the design on the Wu Zixu mirror. The suggestiveness of wide-open eyes and snarling visage of the martyr who died with integrity would not have been lost on the Later Han viewer. These images were cued for an admiring eye looking for the “air of valor.”

The pictorial details of the few bristling eyebrows and frenziedly streaming beard would have excited the Han eye to no less a degree. The Han ideal of male appearance comes down to, among other things, a cluster of flowing whiskers, which was considered a staple of masculine gallantry. Han emperor Gaozu was described as having “the facial features of a dragon and a beautiful beard and whiskers” (*SJ*, 8:341); Huo Guang had a quiet personality and “uncluttered eyebrows and a beautiful beard and whiskers” (*HS*, 66:2933); Liu Yao had “only about one hundred whiskers but they are five *che* long.”¹¹⁰ The portrait of the deceased in the Anping tomb matches these verbal portraits with a pictorial equivalent. The mural makes a point of the refinement of the sitter’s beard and whiskers (Fig. 20), a period idiom that emphasizes his physiognomic respectability. With this preference in mind, one finds it easier to appreciate the kind of bravura of a man before suicide as recorded in *Hou Han shu*, which gives a dramatic portrait of Wen Xu, a distinguished individual of the Later Han. Wen was ambushed while on a mission and captured by a local warlord who offered him an officer’s position. Wen Xu “raged and thundered.” When the rebel soldiers scrambled to kill him, the commander said, “this man of honor would die on his honor. Give him a sword.” Wen Xu received the sword, “clenched his whiskers between his teeth, and, looking at those surrounding him, declared: ‘Now that I am cornered to death by rascals, I

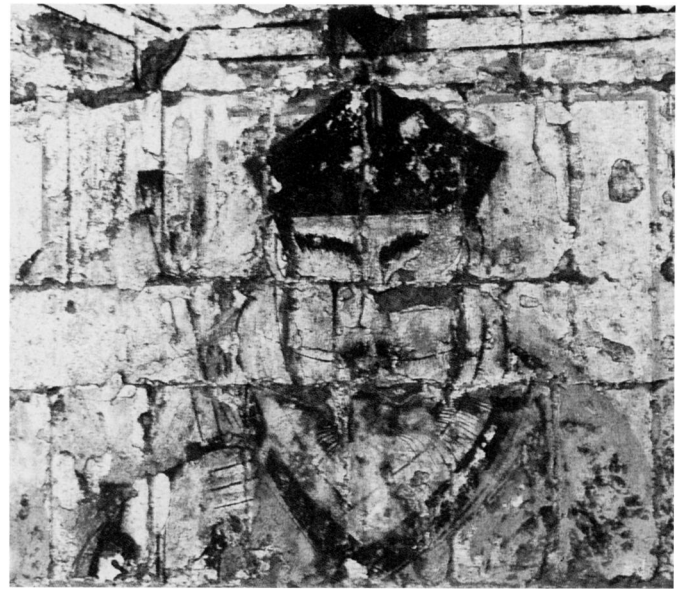
shouldn't soil my *beard and whiskers*.' He threw himself on the sword and died" (HHS, 81:2673; my emphasis). If a Later Han contemporary were actually to visualize this swaggering spectacle, he would presumably have conjured up an image like the Wu Zixu figure with flaring whiskers on the mirror, whose features and posture could best be captured by a medieval expression such as "his sleeves fully swung, his beard and whiskers spreading out."¹¹¹ Mirrors of history reflect contemporary faces.

Epilogue

The fact that there is apparently no end to the pursuit of meaning says much about the limits of iconography and the "meaning" of a work of art. The desire to touch all bases suggests that meaning is in perpetual flux and can hardly be stabilized; it manifests itself in a riot of polysemy. This situation in turn affects the way one articulates the experience of images of the past and makes one sympathetic to Aby Warburg's fretting over the "unilinear" character of verbalizing about them. "So deeply convinced [was he] of the complexity of the historical processes that interested him that he found it increasingly vexing to have to string up his presentation in one single narrative" which did not allow for his scheme of polysemy.¹¹² The solution to Warburg's dilemma is supplied, in literary studies, first by William Empson in his grappling with "seven types of ambiguity," further developed by J. H. Miller in his interpretive strategy of "lateral dance," and culminates in Roland Barthes "writing degree zero" in an orgy of "pleasure of the text."¹¹³

The decorum necessary in dealing with ancient art prevents me from going that far. My reading both conforms to and shows the limits of the unilinear narrative: one cannot pursue a sustained reading, political or otherwise, without sliding into "lateral dances." While my interpretation of the mirror design does deflate the illusion of the possibility of a sustained unilinear account of an art work, it should not be taken as valorizing a kind of a deconstructionist turning in the ever-widening gyre farther away from the referential "worldliness."¹¹⁴ True, the diverse concerns may branch off into different thematics which take on a life of their own, but they are closely interlocked and orthogonal to what we now call the historical horizon. That is why I start with a political-historical reading, pause in the middle to pursue themes other than political history, only to end by reverting to the same political-historical scenario while addressing a seemingly unrelated issue such as physiognomy. A sustained political reading alone could not do the job, nor could a physiognomic inquiry avoid political history.

Another problem emerges from the present study: how can we do things with context when the context has been lost? Thousands of Han bronze mirrors have been excavated or passed on to us, but only a handful of them bear the Wu Zixu matter. Precisely because of this rarity, the mirror



20 Mural from a tomb at Anping, Hebei, portrait of the tomb occupant (detail), ca. 25–220 (from Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics, *Anping donghan bihuamu* [The Eastern Han tomb with murals at Anping], Beijing, 1990, pl. 40)

design implies an immediate circumstantial context and should not be dismissed as innocently "ornamental." The rarefied crop of mirrors may have arisen from a special order or the mirrors may have been made for special occasions or special patrons. We have no means of knowing. This, however, need not prevent us from dealing with context, for there are different contexts: a *circumstantial* context in the form of a set of events, and a *mental* context, often linguistically constituted, in which people communicate and order their experience through a pattern of discourse. There is also a fine line to be drawn between immediate context, which can be causal to an art work as it can be contingent to it, and a larger context which may be more removed in time and space, yet more immediate in informing the art work. Immediate circumstantial contexts are often more contingent than the mental context in encoding a work of art, especially in the case of decorative art.

We care about the immediate circumstances, mostly or partially because we are concerned that they may have generated or distilled hermetic messages into art works whose meaning would otherwise elude us. Yet the evidence we need, particularly when art objects of ancient times are concerned, is frequently unavailable. This seemingly insoluble hermeneutic problem can be redeemed by our grip on the public discourse of the time. Ancient bronze mirrors were indeed for private consumption: they took on a personal intimacy once they were owned by individuals. But private intimacy does not literally translate into the decorative patterns which are often part of the public stock of social

110. Fang Xuanling (A.D. 579–648), *Jin shu* (History of the Jin dynasty), Beijing, 1974, 130:2683.

111. "鑿決狀", *Jin shu* (as in n. 110), 104:2716.

112. E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London, 1986, 284. See also M. A. Holly, "Unwriting Iconology," in *Iconography at the Cross-*

roads, ed. B. Cassidy, Princeton, N.J., 1993, 25.

113. W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London, 1930; J. H. Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, 127; R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller, New York, 1975, 3, 19.

114. For the insistence on the text being "worldly" and a critique of the practice of hermetic textuality, see E. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, 3–4, 31–53.

taste. The ancients' response to conventional decorative patterns may well have been private, but such private feelings, paradoxically, have a conventional—therefore public—way of articulating themselves. Our clue lies then in the access to the shared mentality manifested in the ancients' subscription to a common pool of tropes and conceits which organized their perceptions of conventional decorations and configured the map of their private sentiments. So our concern should not be so much with the vagaries of private languages as with the *way* private feelings channeled through public discourse. The art objects show one thing, yet we know *how* they could have meant another to the viewers of the time. Knowing *their* discursive pattern would unveil the sentiment sedimented in the decorative pattern. And that is *how* one holds the mirror up to nature—"to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."¹¹⁵

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115. W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, III, ii, 19–20.