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The Silent Beauty: Changing Portrayals of Xi Shi,
from *Zhiguai* and Poetry to Ming Fiction and Drama

INTRODUCTION

Xi Shi 西施 is one of the most famous beauties of ancient China. Sent by her king to seduce an enemy monarch, King Fuchai of Wu 吳王夫差 (r. 495–473 BCE), Xi Shi's story forms one of the key narratives of self-sacrificing women in traditional Chinese culture. The enormous popularity of the Xi Shi legend throughout the imperial era disguises the fact that her story was a relatively late addition to the history of the conflict between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue. This paper describes the development of her biography beginning from the Eastern Han dynasty, with particular reference to her appearance in the *zhiguai* 志怪 (or, strange, fantastic) tales from the Age of Disunion, in the poetry of Li Bai 李白 (701–762), and in Tang and Song gazetteers. Such texts played a key role in contextualizing Xi Shi's legend, while preserving older traditions, in particular her silence: until the late-imperial era, Xi Shi does not speak. Her experiences thus take place in an emotional vacuum. Her success in seducing the last king of Wu is unquestioned, but she is given no opportunity to express her own opinions and feelings on this or any other subject. Treated as a pawn, eroticised, romanticised, declared a threat to the stability and security of any country in which she resided, Xi Shi was traditionally portrayed as both an innocent victim and as an extremely dangerous woman.

This paper focuses primarily on two famous works of Ming-dynasty literature which feature Xi Shi as a protagonist. Both representations draw upon earlier works of literature for their details, but represent different extremes of opinion. The first is the earliest of the great Kunqu plays: *Huansha ji* 浣紗記 (The Story of the Girl Who Washed Silk) by Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 (1520–1592).¹ Xi Shi is here described

¹ Liang Chenyu's dates are derived from Li Guotao 黎國韜, "Liang Chenyu shengzu nian ji *Huansha ji* chuanguo niandai kao" 梁辰魚生卒年及浣紗記創作年代考, *Wuyi daxue xuebao* 五邑

as a young woman who accepts that it is her patriotic duty to save her country and remains devoted to the interests of the kingdom of Yue and her original fiancé through many years of loneliness and suffering in Wu, prey to the lust of King Fuchai and cut off from any news of home. Finally released from her travails by his majesty's death and the destruction of Wu, she finds herself reunited with her lover and in the climactic act, sets sail with him across the lakes of the Yangtze Delta region. This opera is one of the very first works of literature in which Xi Shi speaks. Although the portrayal of Xi Shi in *Huansha ji* is framed within the parameters created by earlier texts, the opportunity afforded for her to express her feelings on her tragic situation greatly increases the pathos of this work.

The romantic account found in the play stands in contrast to the significantly bleaker description of Xi Shi's life found in Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574–1645) classic novel *Xin lieguo zhi* 新列國志 (New Account of the States [of the Eastern Zhou]). Though this novel draws much of its inspiration from ancient Chinese texts, returning the beautiful Xi Shi to her original status as a silent pawn, Feng Menglong nevertheless incorporates a number of later accretions to her legend into his portrayal of the conflict between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue. Feng's novel, while ostensibly preserving its credentials as a historically accurate account of events during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, derives many of the most shocking details of the exploitation of the lovely Xi Shi from later popular traditions.

In order to understand Feng Menglong's work further, the portrayal of Xi Shi in his *Xin lieguo zhi* is compared here with that found in another of Feng's works – *Qingshi* 情史 (Anatomy of Love), a compilation of some 850 tales of love, romance, and lust. In it, Xi Shi's story is once again presented as the sustained sexual and emotional abuse of an innocent young woman by powerful men. The accounts of her life given by Liang Chengyu and Feng Menglong are specifically selected for consideration in the study at hand because they represent opposite ends of the spectrum of late-imperial portrayals of Xi Shi. Beginning from the same sources, they have created very different accounts of her life and fate.

大學學報 10.4 (2008), pp. 59–63. Li suggests a date of composition for *Huansha ji* in the early 1560s; other scholars place it in 1579 (see Xu Fuming 徐扶明, “Liang Chenyu de shengping he ta chuanguo *Huansha ji* de yitu” 梁辰魚的生平和他創作浣紗記的意圖, in *Wenxue yichan zengkan* 文學遺產增刊 [Vol. 9; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962, pp. 25–33], p. 28).

XI SHI IN ANCIENT CHINESE TEXTS

Numerous ancient Chinese texts make reference to Xi Shi but the vast majority give no details of her life, focusing instead on just a single issue – her great beauty. This is presented in Warring States and Western Han texts as her defining characteristic, requiring no further elaboration or details, nor even a description. In these early references she is also not associated with any specific country. It is not until the appearance of *Yuejue shu* 越絕書 (Lost Histories of Yue) and *Wu Yue chungiu* 吳越春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of the Kingdoms of Wu and Yue) in the Eastern Han dynasty that Xi Shi began to acquire the rudiments of a biography.² Of these two texts, *Yuejue shu* is by far the more important. The latter's chapter "Jidi zhuan" 記地傳 (Record of the Lands [of Yue]) records a building known as Meiren Gong 美人宮 (Palace of Beautiful Women):

Meiren Gong is 590 *bu* in circumference (838 m), with two land gates and one water gate. Today it forms the hill and pounded earth walls of Beitianli Village. This palace and tower is where [King] Goujian trained the beauties Xi Shi and Zheng Dan. These women came from Zhuluoshan (Kudzu Vine Mountain) and they were going to be presented to the Wu court.³ They themselves said that they were from a backward and poor place so they were afraid that they would be thought simple and rustic. Therefore they were sent to live here, near a great highway.⁴ 美人宮，周五百九十步，陸門二水門一。今北壇利里丘土城，句踐所習教美女西施，鄭旦宮臺也。女出於苧蘿山，欲獻於吳。自謂東垂僻陋，恐女樸鄙，故近大道居。

The above, short passage would prove the basis for virtually all subsequent biographies of Xi Shi, which are founded upon the notion of her extremely humble background in Yue and her needing special training to make her acceptable as a sexual partner for the king of Wu and

² For the textual history of *Yuejue shu*, see Olivia Milburn, *The Glory of Yue: An Annotated Translation of the Yuejue shu* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), pp. 37–61. See also Zhou Shengchun 周生春, "Yuejue shu chengshu niandai ji zuozhe xintan" 越絕書成書年代及作者新探, in Qian Bochong 錢伯成, ed., *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 (Vol. 47; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), pp. 121–39. For the dating of *Wu Yue chungiu*; see John Lagerwey, "Wu Yüeh ch'un ch'iu," in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), pp. 473–76.

³ Extensive excavations carried out in 1959 and 1973–1974 at Zhuluoshan, now known as Xishishan 西施山, have served to demonstrate that this was in fact a significant Yue settlement in the late Spring and Autumn period; see Zhong Yuebao 鍾越寶, Luo Haidi 羅海迪, *Shaoxing wenwu* 紹興文物 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), pp. 3–4. See also Liang Zhiming 梁志明, *Shaoxing xian wenwu zhi* 紹興縣文物志 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 9.

⁴ Yuan Kang 袁康, Wu Ping 吳平, *Yuejue shu* 越絕書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985; hereafter, *Yuejue shu*), p. 59 ("Jidi zhuan" 記地傳).

companion in his revels at court. The “Jiushu” 九術 (Nine Methods) chapter of *Yuejue shu* describes the plot hatched by Grandee Zhong 大夫種 to avenge the insults sustained by King Goujian of Yue 越王勾踐 (r. 496–465 BCE) after his surrender at Kuaiji Mountain 會稽山, and lists the presentation of beautiful women to the enemy monarch as the fourth method to achieve his revenge.⁵ Xi Shi and her much less famous companion Zheng Dan are said to have gone to Wu to seduce King Fuchai of Wu in what is thought to be the earliest recorded example of the use of the *meiren ji* 美人計 (literally beautiful women plan, or honey-trap). Much the same tale is given in *Wu Yue chungiu*, though the latter adds the detail that Xi Shi and Zheng Dan’s studies lasted for three years before they were adjudged ready to appeal to the king, and thus represents a fusion of the two different stories given in *Yuejue shu*.⁶

Unlike the other protagonists featured in stories concerning the well-known enmity between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue at the end of the Spring and Autumn period, Xi Shi is portrayed in ancient Chinese historical texts as having no personality and no opinions – other than perhaps a belief in her own lack of sophistication. King Fuchai of Wu is described as tormented with guilt over his father’s sudden demise from an injury received in battle against the kingdom of Yue, but also as a man of some magnanimity and gentleness. His explosive anger when annoyed is also attested in a number of ancient historical texts.⁷ The king of Wu is bracketed by his Prime Minister, a sophisticated, corrupt man, and by the blunt and tactless Wu Zixu 伍子胥. Meanwhile King Goujian of Yue is portrayed as a man of subtle intelligence and great endurance, determined to lead his kingdom to glory. Having once nearly caused its destruction and having survived years of humiliating exile in Wu, the king of Yue became determined to avenge the insults that he had suffered. And yet once he succeeded in his aims, the king of Yue is said to have turned against some of his closest advisors.⁸ King Goujian is assisted by the supporting characters of Grandee Zhong and Fan Li 范蠡, men of exceptional ability – the former taking responsibility for conducting the king of Yue’s diplomatic missions, the latter being in charge of the government at home.

⁵ See *Yuejue shu*, p. 84 (“Jiushu” 九術).

⁶ See Zhou Shengchun 周生春, *Wu Yue chungiu jijiao huikao* 吳越春秋輯校匯考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), p. 147 (“Goujian yinmou waizhuan” 勾踐陰謀外傳).

⁷ For a biography of King Fuchai of Wu; see Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 31, pp. 1469–75. For King Fuchai’s sudden rage, particularly when presented with unwelcome news; see for example Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 1677 (Ai 13).

⁸ For a biography of King Goujian of Yue; see *Shiji* 41, pp. 1739–47.

Both these men were originally natives of Chu; their personal loyalty to King Goujian and their determination to serve his cause to the end are recorded in many texts.

Caught among these complex characters, Xi Shi is an anomaly. In no ancient text is any speech attributed to her and her every act is the result of a decision made by one of the powerful men who controls her destiny. The issue of her silence is particularly significant given the importance of speech in the careers (and their subsequent portrayal in traditional Chinese literature) of many other women in a similar position at the beck and call of a ruler. For these exploited and vulnerable women speech was crucial, winning them admiration for the tact and sensitivity with which they handled difficult men, or loathing for the malicious slander that they used in their own interests.⁹ In the instances where a woman's silence is specifically remarked on, it is invested with great meaning, as in the case of the concubine of King Wen of Chu 楚文王 (r. 689–677 BCE), who refused to speak to him (in spite of the fact that they had two children together) as a gesture of loyalty to her first spouse.¹⁰ Xi Shi's silence is of a different kind. Her silence is not the result of a matter of principle, but because her words do not matter. In her earliest incarnations, what is important about Xi Shi is not what she thinks or what she does, it is who she is. Xi Shi is beautiful and this ensures that King Fuchai of Wu will love and favor her above all others. Xi Shi is also a native of Yue, and thus the king of Wu will feel uncomfortable about attacking this enemy kingdom. The way that these events are presented in early imperial texts ensures that there is no need for Xi Shi to persuade the king with clever speeches, for that is irrelevant. As long as she is the focus of the king's love, she has succeeded in her role.

THE BEAUTIES OF THE *SHIYI JI*

Among the stories found in *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (Remaining Records), a Jin-era *zhiguai* compilation of Wang Jia 王嘉 (?–390), one in particular would have a considerable impact on later representations of Xi Shi. It is clearly related to the “Jiushu” chapter of *Yuejue shu*, for it describes how beautiful women were presented to the king of Wu in order to

⁹ See Paul Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies: Gender and the Male Community in Early Chinese Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), p. 8.

¹⁰ This concubine had previously been the wife of the marquis of Xi 息. Her sons were Prince Duao 堵敖 and Xiongyun 熊惲, the future King Cheng of Chu 楚成王 (r. 671–626 BCE); see *Zuozhuan*, pp. 198–99 (Zhuang 14).

distract him from the business of government. Yet it also represents a development on the original text, in that the main focus is not on the machinations of Yue but on the luxurious lifestyles of the young women concerned and the loving relationship that they enjoyed with King Fuchai of Wu, who attempted to save them from disaster when his kingdom fell. The *Shiyi ji* story is presented in the context of the worship of two goddesses by contemporary inhabitants of the city of Suzhou:¹¹

Yue planned to destroy Wu and so they gathered together the greatest treasures, the most beautiful women and the most unusual foods to present them to Wu. Thus they obtained Yinfeng jades, Guhuang stallions, and eels from the Xiang and Yuan rivers. They also presented two beautiful women, one of whom was named Yiguang and the other was called Xiuming, to Wu. Wu sent them to live in the Pepper Palace, and threaded small pearls to make blinds. In the morning they were let down to shade them from the sun, in the evening they were rolled up so that they could see the moon. The two women would sit together opposite the window inspecting their makeup and jewellery in the mirror, surrounded by a waterfall of pearls. All those who caught a glimpse of them were moved by their loveliness and in their amazement called them “goddesses.” It was as if a pair of phoenixes had appeared in the light mist [hovering over the] autumn lotuses in the shallows of the river. The king of Wu was bewitched and forgot all about the government until the Yue army invaded his country. Then he fled from the Wu Garden with the two women. When the Yue soldiers fought their way in they found the two women sitting under the bamboos and trees. They called them goddesses, and looked at them from a distance, not daring to approach.¹² 越謀滅吳，蓄天下奇寶美人異味以進於吳。得陰峰之瑤，古皇之驥，湘沅之鱣。又有美女二人，一名夷光，一名修明，以貢於吳。吳處以椒華之房，貫細珠為簾幌。朝下以蔽景，夕捲以待月。二人當軒並坐，理鏡靚粧於珠幌之內。竊窺者莫不動心，驚魂謂之神人。若雙鸞之在輕霧，沚水之漾秋蕖。吳王妖惑忘政，及越兵入國。乃抱二女以逃吳苑。越軍亂入，見二女在竹樹下，皆言神女。望而不敢侵。

¹¹ The worship of the two goddesses is not described in any imperial-era gazetteer for the city of Suzhou or the surrounding region. Either this detail was invented by the author or this is a description of a short-lived local cult.

¹² Wang Jia 王嘉, *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (CSJC edn.) 3, p. 74. For a discussion of the textual history of this important *zhiguai* compilation; see Robert Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 64–67.

According to many later commentators, Yiguang was the personal name of Xi Shi, and Xiuming has also been conventionally identified as Zheng Dan.¹³ Many subsequent literary references to Xi Shi use the two names interchangeably. However, there is a tradition in which Xi Shi and Yiguang are regarded as two different people. This concerns a popular ghost story written in Tang times but set during the time of Liang Wudi 梁武帝 (r. 502–549). According to this tale a pair of friends, both members of the literati, were visiting a scenic site near Nanjing when suddenly the mists cleared and they found themselves greeted by two exceptionally lovely young women: the ghosts of Xi Shi and Yiguang. Xi Shi identifies herself as a girl of poor family, who made her living washing clothes in the river before she was chosen for the Wu king's harem, and describes Yiguang as one of King Goujian's concubines, selected by him to be presented to King Fuchai of Wu. Having identified themselves, Xi Shi and Yiguang give the men a memento of their manifestation and vanish. The source of this ghost story is conventionally cited as a text entitled *Qiongguai lu* 窮怪錄 (A Record of the Strangest Things); however, its popularity was derived from the fact that it was included such widely-read works as the Song-era encyclopaedia *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping [reign-era, 976–983]) and the Ming-era *Guang Bowuzhi* 廣博物志 (Expanded Treatise on Curiosities).¹⁴ This story was certainly well-known to Feng Menglong, who included it as the first story in the “Qinggui” 情鬼 (Revenants) section of his *Qingshi* compendium.¹⁵ The popularity of this tale is derived at least in part from the romantic associations of any tale concerning Xi Shi and her avatar Yiguang, but also from the conception of ordinary living men being able to fulfil their fantasy of meeting one of the great beauties of antiquity, and finding her in every way as lovely as they could have imagined.

¹³ See for example Chen Yaowen 陳耀文, *Zhengyang* 正楊 (SKQS edn.) 3, p. 26b; see also Chen Houyao 陳厚耀, *Chunqiu zhanguo yici* 春秋戰國異辭 (SKQS edn.) 52, p. 53b.

¹⁴ Modern versions of the text do not include this story; see Anon., *Qiongguai lu* 窮怪錄 (CSJC edn.). These events are said to have taken place in the summer of the year 512. For later texts incorporating this tale, see Li Fang 李昉 et al., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986) 326, pp. 2398–99 (“Guilei” 鬼類: “Liu Dao” 劉導); see also Dong Sizhang 董斯張, *Guang bowuzhi* 廣博物志 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992) 15, pp. 329–30.

¹⁵ See Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Qingshi* 情史, in Zhou Fang 周方, Hu Huibin 胡慧斌, *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), pp. 743–44. This Ming recension is considered in Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), pp. 93–94, but without reference to the older versions of this story.

TANG IMAGES OF XI SHI

During the Tang dynasty, the poetry of Li Bai seems to have made a particularly significant contribution to the way that Xi Shi was portrayed, given Li's importance in popularising the image of Xi Shi as a woman of very humble origins. Though this was an aspect of Xi Shi's biography that goes back to at least the Eastern Han dynasty, the evidence suggests that Li Bai played a crucial role in establishing the idea that she originally worked as a washerwoman – a washer of silks (*huansha* 浣紗). This appears not to have been mentioned anywhere in pre-Tang literature and seems to be derived from a confusion between her and another unfortunate near-contemporary: the girl who threw herself into the river to drown rather than divulge Wu Zixu's whereabouts to his pursuers. This is one of many stories concerning Wu Zixu's travails while escaping from Chu after the death of his father and older brother at the hands of King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (r. 528–516 BCE). This tradition seems to have developed to emphasise Wu Zixu's fall from grace; formerly he was a proud member of a distinguished ministerial family who, when his father lost royal favor, became a hunted fugitive. En route to the kingdom of Wu (where he would eventually find sanctuary), Wu Zixu is said to have begged for food from a local girl that he encountered washing silks in the Li River 漂水. When he left, she committed suicide lest she inadvertently divulge his whereabouts.¹⁶ In the circumstances, Wu Zixu could not protect himself, let alone any of the people who helped him.

It is not clear why the attributes of the anonymous girl who died to allow Wu Zixu to proceed in safety became confused with the famous beauty Xi Shi, but it is evident that this conflation became generally accepted in Tang times. The earliest surviving work of literature that seems to make this conflation is the poem “He Zhaowang kan ji” 和趙王看妓 (Harmonizing with the King of Zhao's [Poem] *Inspecting a Courtesan*) by the Liang and Northern Zhou dynasty statesman Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581).¹⁷ In this case the explicit association of the term *huansha* with Xi Shi is only made in commentaries; though it is likely that Yu Xin intended the reader to understand a reference to her, the wording of his poem is sufficiently ambiguous that it might otherwise refer to that unfortunate woman who encountered Wu Zixu.¹⁸ In the case of Tang

¹⁶ See *Yuejue shu*, p. 6 (“Jing Pingwang” 荆平王). In this early description of the girl she is described as *jixu* 擊絮 (beating the silk with a paddle), later on this became refined to *huansha*.

¹⁷ Ni Fan 倪璠, *Yu Zishan ji zhu* 庾子山集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), p. 374.

¹⁸ See for example Wu Zhaoyi 吳兆宜, *Yu Kaifu ji jianzhu* 庾開府集箋註 (SKQS edn.) 5, p. 47b.

poetry, and particularly in the works of Li Bai, there is no such ambiguity. In poems such as “Xi Shi” 西施 and “Song Zhu Ba zhi Jiangdong fude huansha shi” 送祝八之江東賦得浣紗石 (On Seeing Off the Eighth Master Zhu to Jiangdong, I Composed a Poem to Silk-Washing Rock) Li Bai explicitly states that the beautiful Xi Shi rose from the humble station of a washerwoman to that of bedmate of King Fuchai of Wu.¹⁹ Such an understanding of Xi Shi’s early life can also be seen in the poem “Huansha shi shang nü” 浣紗石上女 (The Girl at Silk-Washing Rock), which describes the most famous of washerwomen and perhaps also her contemporary counterpart:

玉面耶溪女	A girl from [Ruo]ye Stream with a face like jade, ²⁰
青娥紅粉妝	Black eyebrows [set off] carmine makeup.
一雙金齒屐	A pair of golden-yellow clogs,
兩足白如霜	[Contain] two feet as white as snow. ²¹

In addition to popularising a new strand in Xi Shi’s early biography, Li Bai was also instrumental in developing the portrayal of Xi Shi as the favorite concubine of the last king of Wu. In what would become a famous series of poems, Li Bai describes her as a drunken beauty, enjoying herself in circumstances of the utmost luxury with King Fuchai. It seems that there was no earlier reference to the use or abuse of alcohol at the king’s court, suggesting that Li Bai invented this detail to appeal to the sensibilities of a contemporary audience. In the poem entitled “Wuqi qu” 烏棲曲 (Crow Roosting Song), the indulgence of the king and his beloved in wine is presented within an extended description of a lifestyle of great decadence, which has vitiated their appetites:

姑蘇臺上烏棲時	Above the Gusu Tower as the crows come to roost,
吳王宮裏醉西施	Inside the palace of the king of Wu, Xi Shi gets drunk.
吳歌楚舞歡未畢	Before the performance of Wu song and Chu dance is over,

¹⁹ See Qu Tuiyuan 瞿蛻園, Zhu Jincheng 朱金城, eds., *Li Bai ji jiaozhu* 李白集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007; hereafter, *Li Bai*), pp. 1288 and 1029, respectively.

²⁰ Ruoye Stream is supposed to have been the site where the great swordsmiths of Yue made their finest blades; see *Yuejue shu*, pp. 79–80 (“Ji baojian” 記寶劍). In an alternative tradition, Ruoye is also supposed to have been the site of the tomb of King Goujian’s ancestor; see *Yuejue shu*, p. 61 (“Jidi zhuan” 記地傳). This reference gives the poem an exotic “Yue” flavor, which is found in many Tang evocations of the legendary beauty Xi Shi; see Edward Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: Tang Images of the South* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 82–83.

²¹ *Li Bai*, p. 1500.

青山欲銜半邊日	The verdant mountains are about to swallow half the sun.
銀箭金壺漏水多	As the silver arrow sinks within the golden clepsydra, many moments drip away,
起看秋月墜江波	They arise to see the autumn moon sinking into the river's waves,
東方漸高奈樂何	As [the sun] gradually rises in the east, where will they seek pleasure next? ²²

“Wuqi qu” is one of several poems by Li Bai which incorporate the figure of the drunken beauty into the legend of King Fuchai of Wu’s blood-stained romance. In it, Xi Shi is presented in the company of King Fuchai and surrounded by the musicians and dancers who will perform for their entertainment. The emphasis is on the decadence of their pleasures. Another poem by Li Bai, entitled “Kouhao Wuwang meiren banzui” 口號吳王美人半醉 (A Panegyric on the King of Wu’s Half-Drunken Favorite), again mentions Xi Shi’s use of wine, but in a significantly more eroticised context. In this famous *jueju* poem, King Fuchai and Xi Shi are separated into different couplets – perhaps even different locations – and she is presented as being highly vulnerable as well as desirable:

風動荷花水殿香	The wind stirs the water-lilies filling the palace with their perfume,
姑蘇臺上宴吳王	The king of Wu banquets at the top of Gusu Tower.
西施醉舞嬌無力	Xi Shi dances drunkenly, charmingly weak from exertion,
笑倚東窗白玉床	Smiling she reclines against a white jade couch in front of the eastern window. ²³

We turn to another work, that entitled *Wudi ji* 吳地記 (Record of the Lands of Wu) by Lu Guangwei 陸廣微 (fl. ninth century). It introduces two important new strands into Xi Shi’s biography. The first describes how on her way to Wu, she gave birth to Fan Li’s baby. This event is supposed to have taken place at Yuerting 語兒亭 (Child’s Neighborhood), a place-name apparently derived from a combination of Yuerxiang 語兒鄉 (Child’s Township) and Nüyangting 女陽亭 (Girl’s Neighborhood), both of which are mentioned in the “Jidi zhuan” chapter of *Yuejue shu*. According to the latter, Yuerxiang was a key battlefield in the Wu–Yue conflict, while Nüyangting was where King Goujian of

²² *Li Bai*, p. 220.

²³ *Li Bai*, p. 1485.

Yue's wife gave birth to a daughter as she accompanied her husband into exile.²⁴ The *Wudi ji* story of Xi Shi's baby was probably derived from that of the queen of Yue.

Wudi ji also is the earliest surviving text to record that after the collapse of the kingdom of Wu in 473 BCE, Xi Shi departed with Fan Li to live a long and happy life roaming around Lake Tai.²⁵ Another work of literature, the poem "Du Qiu niang shi" 杜秋娘詩 (A Poem to Lady Du Qiu) by Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852), is also frequently cited as a key early work in popularising this tale.²⁶

These events were later amplified to form a narrative structure that frames Xi Shi's experiences in Wu and gives them meaning: she and Fan Li met and fell in love, he persuaded her that the demands of loyalty and patriotism should be placed above all considerations of personal happiness, Xi Shi then travelled to Wu where King Fuchai fell madly in love with her and gratified her every whim, and then after the fall of Wu the two of them met again and went off together. Imperial-era scholars have traditionally understood this framing narrative as a post-ninth-century development, following the general acceptance of the inclusion of Fan Li in Xi Shi's legend.²⁷ This contextualizing framework elevates Xi Shi from the completely passive figure recorded in early accounts of these events to a woman who endures enormous unhappiness for the sake of her king and country, a model of patriotic self-sacrifice. Xi Shi's reward is both the happy ending finally granted to her and Fan Li, and her position as one of the great beauties of ancient China, the heroine of one of the most famous love stories in traditional Chinese culture.

The story of Xi Shi's happy reunion with her lover clearly draws on Han-era accounts of the fate of Fan Li, in particular the account given in *Shiji*. There is a longstanding tradition that after King Goujian of Yue conquered Wu and forced King Fuchai to commit suicide, he

²⁴ *Yuejue shu*, p. 64 ("Jidi zhuan").

²⁵ See Lu Guangwei 陸廣徵, *Wudi ji* 吳地記 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), p. 47. In the *Wudi ji*, the story of Xi Shi's romantic escape with Fan Li is attributed to *Yuejue shu*, but it is not found in the transmitted text.

²⁶ See Feng Jiwu 馮集梧, *Fanchuan shiji zhu* 樊川詩集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), p. 42. Du Mu's poem was also often criticized in traditional scholarship for bringing an "ahistorical" ending to the Xi Shi-Fan Li story to prominence; see for example Yang Shen 楊慎, *Shengyan ji* 升菴集 (SKQS edn.) 68, p. 7a–8a.

²⁷ See for example Jin Youli 金友理, *Taihu beikao* 太湖備考 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1998), p. 556. In her study of *Huansha ji*, Hou Shuchuan 侯淑娟 argues that this narrative framework, in addition to developing the story of Xi Shi and Fan Li in a new direction, also played a crucial role in the late-Tang change in popular perception of her character. Up until

turned against the men who had helped him to victory, most notably Grandee Zhong and Fan Li. Fan Li, realising the danger he was in, is supposed to have left the country and changed his name, moving first to Qi where he was known as Chiyi Zipi 騶夷子皮 and then to Tao, where he eventually attained great wealth and lived to considerable old age.²⁸ (There are significant problems with the biography of Fan Li in *Shiji*, not least that Chiyi Zipi, a genuine historical individual mentioned in the *Mozi* 墨子 and *Han Feizi* 韓非子, was living in Qi at a time when Fan Li was demonstrably still resident in Yue).²⁹ In contrast, Grandee Zhong, refusing to believe Fan Li's warnings, stayed in Yue and was in the end ordered to commit suicide by King Goujian. The romantic legend that Fan Li and Xi Shi escaped the clutches of the king of Yue and travelled far across the rivers and lakes of the ancient south to find safety in exile is now perhaps the most well-known version of their ultimate fate, but certainly not the oldest. There is a much earlier though less well-recorded tradition that both died by drowning. Fan Li's lonely death is described in the "Pianxu" 篇叙 (Concluding Remarks) chapter of *Yuejue shu*, while Xi Shi's demise is mentioned both in the *Mozi* and in a lost quotation from the *Wu Yue chungiu*.³⁰ The former text describes her death in the context of terrible fates that so often befall the finest and the best:

As for the five weapons, the sharpest are the first to be broken. As for the five blades, the most finely ground are the first to be worn out. The sweetest wells quickly run dry; the highest-quality timbers are soon felled. The most numinous turtles are the first to be put to the fire; the most sacred snakes are the first to be sacrificed. Bi Gan was cut to pieces because he was so upright, Meng Ben was killed because he was so brave, Xi Shi was drowned because she was so beautiful, and Wu Qi was torn apart because he was so suc-

this time, Xi Shi was conventionally described as the woman who brought about the destruction of the kingdom of Wu, subsequently, emphasis shifted to portraying her as the woman who saved the kingdom of Yue. See Hou Shuchuan, *Huansha ji yanjiu* 浣紗記研究 (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Soochow University, Taiwan), p. 182.

²⁸ See *Shiji* 41, pp. 1752–55; 129, p. 3257.

²⁹ See Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi xiangu* 墨子閒詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), p. 301 ("Feiru xia" 非儒下); see also Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Han Feizi jishi* 韓非子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), p. 426 ("Shuolin shang" 說林上).

³⁰ See *Yuejue shu*, p. 109 ("Pianxu"). The quotation from the *Wu Yue chungiu*, now lost, says that after the fall of Wu, Yue put Xi Shi into a sack and threw her into the river to drown. See for example Chen Houyao 陳厚耀, *Chungiu zhanguo yici* 春秋戰國異辭 (SKQS edn.) 37, p. 45b; also Yang Shen 楊慎, *Danqian yulu* 丹鉛餘錄 (SKQS edn.) 15, p. 20b. The contradictory legends about Xi Shi's fate are discussed in Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, *Suzhou shizhi biji* 蘇州史志筆記 (Suzhou: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1987), pp. 125–27.

cessful.³¹ 今有五錐，此其銛，銛者必先挫。有五刀，此其錯，錯者必先靡。是以甘井近竭，招木近伐。靈龜近灼，神蛇近暴。是故比干之殪，其抗也，孟賁之殺，其勇也，西施之沈，其美也，吳起之裂，其事也。

Writers in imperial-era China, faced with these conflicting reports of Xi Shi's ultimate fate, found themselves with material that would support interpretations ranging from the highly romantic to the deeply tragic. During the Song dynasty, her legend was further amplified by a short-lived and generally unsuccessful trend towards conflation with the story of other ill-fated beauties, most notably Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756).³² This trend, which seems to have quickly fallen into abeyance, may perhaps have failed because by this time the biography of Xi Shi was already too well-established for such a development. She shared little in common with Yang Guifei except her role as a pampered court favorite; their experiences otherwise did not intersect. Though many different aspects of her legend would be explored in Ming literature, considered below, the attempt to link Xi Shi with other palace beauties who suffered tragic fates seems to have been a purely Song phenomenon.

XI SHI IN THE *HUANSHA JI*

Liang Chenyu's *Huansha ji* is a Kunqu play in forty-five acts; it recounts the events of the final stages of the conflict between Wu and Yue. Though earlier plays on the same theme were written, this is the first surviving full-length dramatic treatment of the Xi Shi legend in Chinese literature.³³ As with many earlier portrayals, the relationship

³¹ *Mozi*, pp. 4–5 (“Qinshi” 親士). The importance of this early reference to Xi Shi and her ultimate untimely fate is discussed in Wang Suijin 王遂今, *Wu Yue wenhua shihua* 吳越文化史話 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 29.

³² In a famous example of this type of literature, the poem “Xi Shi” by Liu Yong 柳永 (987–1053) describes her as having been garrotted in front of the army, in a clear attempt to link her legend with that of Yang Guifei. See Liu Yong, *Lezhang ji* 樂章集 (SKQS edn.) 1, p. 17a. For a study of this development; see Zeng Yongyi 曾永義, *Su wenxue gailun* 俗文學概論 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2003), p. 460.

³³ For example the Yuan-era plays “Gusutai Fan Li jin Xi Shi” 姑蘇臺范蠡進西施 (At Gusu Tower Fan Li Presents Xi Shi) by Guan Hanqing 關漢卿, “Mie Wuwang Fan Li gui hu” 滅吳王范蠡歸湖 (Having Killed the King of Wu, Fan Li Returns to the Lakes) by Zhao Mingdao 趙明道, “Tao Zhugong Wuhu chen Xi Shi” 陶朱公五湖沉西施 (Lord Zhu of Tao Drowns Xi Shi in Lake Tai) by Wu Changling 吳昌齡, and the anonymous “Fan Li yu Xi Shi” 范蠡與西施 (Fan Li and Xi Shi) are all recorded in contemporary texts on the theatre, but none survive as more than fragments. Given the vague nature of the descriptions of the contents of these plays, it is extremely difficult to gauge their importance in the development of later dramas on the same subject, in particular *Huansha ji*. See for example Guo Yingde 郭英德, “*Huansha ji*: Lishiji de xinbian” 浣紗記: 歷史劇的新編, *Jiamusi daxue shehui kexue xuebao* 佳木斯大學科學學報 (1998.3), p. 9. Zeng, *Su wenxue gailun*, p. 458, notes that the surviving accounts

between Xi Shi and Fan Li forms a bracketing narrative structure; they meet in the second act “Xunchun” 尋春 (Seeking the Spring) when he encounters her purely by chance as he travels through Yue. The beautiful peasant girl Xi Shi, at that time just sixteen years of age, falls in love with him and they agree to marry; each taking one half of a length of silk as a token. However, many years pass and much must happen before they can be reunited in the final act, as they set out across Lake Tai together.

Although the title of this play suggests that the focus will be on Xi Shi, in fact she is just one of a number of female characters presented in the course of the drama. These include Qianjiao 千嬌, the wife of Chancellor Bo Pi 伯嚭 of Wu, and his two concubines offered by the king of Yue as bribes to encourage him to support the peace treaty with Yue (QiuHong 秋鴻 and Chunyan 春燕), also girls from Xi Shi’s neighboring families (Dong Shi 東施 and Bei Wei 北威), the wife of the soothsayer Gongsun Sheng 公孫聲, and so on.³⁴ These minor characters are intended to introduce comic elements into the play; they also serve to throw Xi Shi’s elegance and refinement into relief, or bring out an unfamiliar aspect of one of the important male characters – for example the greedy and shrewish Qianjiao makes Chancellor Bo Pi’s domestic life hell.³⁵ However, within the first half of the play, which describes the surrender of King Goujian of Yue at Kuaiji, followed by his years of humiliating exile in Wu, it is the queen of Yue who is the most important female character. In this, *Huansha ji* reflects *Wu Yue chungiu*, the

of the contents of Zhao Mingdao’s play in particular suggest a most unusual treatment of the story of Fan Li: after the conquest of Wu, Xi Shi is said to have slandered him to King Goujian with a view to affirming her own position at court, thereby angering him so much that he is forced to leave.

³⁴ The execution of Prime Minister Pi’s wife by the Yue army after the fall of Wu is described in *Yuejue shu*, p. 76 (“Ji Wuwang zhan meng” 記吳王占夢). In this text, as in all others that make reference to this woman, she is anonymous. The presentation of concubines to Prime Minister Bo Pi is described in a number of ancient historical texts, but there were traditionally said to be eight of them; see for example Shanghai shifan daxue guji zhenglizu 上海師範大學古籍整理組, *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), p. 634 (“Yueyu shang” 越語上). The character of Dong Shi is derived from a number of different sources: the idea that an ugly local woman scared all her neighbors by imitating Xi Shi’s bewitching frown comes from the *Zhuangzi*; see Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), p. 515 (“Tianyun” 天運). A number of texts cite *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (A Record of the World in the Taiping [Era, 976–984]), as the source of the idea that there were two villages at Zhuluoshan, one called Xishi (from which the eponymous beauty came) and the other called Dongshi; see Yue Shi 樂史, *Taiping huanyu ji* (SKQS edn.) 96, pp. 14b–15a. The character of Gongsun Sheng’s wife is derived from *Yuejue shu*, p. 74 (“Ji Wuwang zhan meng”).

³⁵ See Zhang Chenshi 張忱石, Zhong Wen 鍾文, Liu Shangrong 劉尚榮, Lou Zhiwei 樓志偉, *Huansha ji jiaozhu* 浣紗記校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994; hereafter, *Huansha ji*),

earliest text to make significant reference to King Goujian's wife and to record a song which she is said to have composed on the occasion of accompanying her husband into exile.³⁶ In the first half of the play, the audience is only periodically reminded of Xi Shi's existence, so for example act nine, "Yiyue" 憶約 (Calling to Mind the Engagement), consists of a lengthy monologue about her worries given Fan Li's lengthy absence and the lack of news, particularly considering that she has just heard that Wu and Yue have gone to war.³⁷ The queen of Yue on the other hand is accorded a significant role in major historical events as she is portrayed as a key supporter and advisor to her husband during the difficult years of his exile in Wu. Xi Shi, the most important female protagonist in the second half of the play, finally overlaps with the queen of Yue in act twenty-five, "Jiaoji" 教技 (Training in the Necessary Skills), when the latter is sent by King Goujian to train the peasant girl in the arts that she will need to seduce the king of Wu.³⁸ The two main female characters in this play work as counterpoints to each other. The queen of Yue, a woman of the highest rank, is portrayed as a heroic figure, motivated by a strong sense of patriotism.³⁹ The beautiful peasant, Xi Shi, is forced to play a role in the politics of the age which nothing in her birth or upbringing has prepared her for, which results in her having to endure years of misery. The queen of Yue is proud to support her husband's efforts to restore the glory of his kingdom; Xi Shi is an unhappy pawn in Fan Li's and King Goujian's plans. She no longer simply acquiesces in silence to the role that others have designed for her, but can protest her unwillingness to fall in with the

pp. 37-40 ("Huijian" 賄奸).

³⁶ See Zhou Shengchun 周生春, *Wu Yue chunqiu jijiao huikao* 吳越春秋輯校匯考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997; hereafter, *Wu Yue chunqiu*), p. 120 ("Goujian ruchen wai-zhuan" 勾踐入臣外傳). This song is also included in a somewhat abridged form in *Huansha ji*, p. 55 ("Xingcheng" 行成). The importance of the character of the queen of Yue is considered in Zhang Yanrong 張燕榮, "Aiqing zaoyu zhengzhi de langman chuanqi: lun Liang Chenyu *Huansha ji* de aiqingguan yu nüxingguan" 愛情遭遇政治的浪漫傳奇: 論梁辰魚洗紗記的愛情觀與女性觀, *Xiqu yanjiu* 戲曲研究 70 (2006, pp. 144-52), pp. 149-50. The author notes the careful balance among the characters found in the *Huansha ji*, whereby honest and upright ministers (such as Wu Zixu) are contrasted with venal and conniving ones (Prime Minister Bo Pi), and so on. Xi Shi, the heroine of humble origins, therefore has her foil in the long-suffering and deeply patriotic queen.

³⁷ See *Huansha ji*, pp. 49-50.

³⁸ See *Huansha ji*, pp. 142-44.

³⁹ Although the queen of Yue does not behave according to the conventional model of a female knight-errant, given that she neither assumes a male role nor dresses up as a man to affect the course of historical events, there is nevertheless a considerable similarity in the portrayal of her character with this popular image. The importance of this theme in Ming-Qing

demands of the powerful men who determine her fate, and can declare her misery when she is forced to obey their wishes.

Huansha ji is one of the earliest surviving works of Chinese literature in which Xi Shi speaks. No doubt this development was in part a function of the fact that the Kunqu play *Huansha ji* is designed for performance, and leaving a major character silent from start to finish would have little to offer the audience, but it is nevertheless striking that so few earlier works of literature attempted to provide words for Xi Shi to say. Given her status as one of the great beauties of Chinese antiquity and a protagonist in an exceptionally famous love-story, her silence in the massive body of pre-Ming literature about the conflict between Wu and Yue is remarkable. It would also seem to suggest that there was a strong break between literati and dramatic conceptions of the character of Xi Shi. Literati representations seem to have in the main drawn on images of her beauty derived from classical works of literature, the very texts in which she is most silent. Within drama (and perhaps also popular story-telling traditions), however, there is every reason to suspect that Xi Shi spoke long before. At least three plays on the subject of Xi Shi are known to have been written during the Yuan dynasty, but given that they do not survive, it is impossible to know how she was portrayed, or what influence they had on *Huansha ji*.⁴⁰

Within the *Huansha ji* narrative, the turning point in the characterisation of Xi Shi comes in the twenty-third act, “Pin Shi” 聘施 (Visiting the Shi Family), when after three years’ absence as a prisoner in Wu, Fan Li returns to find Xi Shi and inform her that they will not be getting married, but that instead he wishes her to go to Wu to seduce King Fuchai. Here, Xi Shi accepts her patriotic duty but bewails her lover’s selfishness in forcing her into an unwelcome role:

drama is considered in Wai-ye Li, “Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature,” *HJAS* 59.2 (1999, pp. 363-443), pp. 365-67.

⁴⁰ These plays are entitled “Xi Shi” 西施, “Xizi jia Chiyi” 西子嫁鴟夷 (Lady Xi Marries Chiyi), and “Zhuluoren” 苧蘿人 (The Girl from Kudzu Vine [Mountain]) – the latter also known under the title “Zhuluo Xizi” 苧蘿西子 (Lady Xi from Kudzu Vine [Mountain]); see Lü Weifen 吕薇芬, *Quan Yuan qu diangu cidian* 全元曲典故辭典 (Wuhan: Hubei cishu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 254, 252, 359. The titles of these plays all suggest that the focus, as with *Huansha ji*, was on the character of Xi Shi. A number of other plays about individuals involved in the conflict between Wu and Yue were written during the Yuan dynasty; such as Li Shoujing’s 李壽卿 “Shuo Zhuan Zhu Wu Yuan chuixiao” 說縛諸伍員吹簫 (To Persuade Zhuan Zhu, Wu Yuan (i.e., Wu Zixu) Plays the Flute), a drama about the assassination of King Liao of Wu 吳王僚 (r. 526-515 BCE). See Yang Jialuo 楊家駱, *Quan Yuan zaju chubian* 全元雜劇初編 (vol. 7; Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1985), pp. 2899-986.

(Fan Li): Originally I planned to marry you, my lady, and live happily ever after. Who could have guessed that the country would be invaded and people killed, our ruler captured and our ministers imprisoned? Fortunately thanks to my plan, his majesty has been released and has returned to his kingdom. Now the king of Wu is unbelievably debauched, a drunken sot who lusts after beautiful women. His majesty wants to find lovely ladies and thus take advantage of [King Fuchai's] unbridled desires. We have searched throughout the country, and there is no-one suitable. I then remembered that you, my lady, are of exceptional loveliness, such as can topple kingdoms and overturn cities, and I happened to mention this, as a result of which his majesty wants to see you to beg you [to go to the king of Wu]. You have not yet had an opportunity to assent, and so it is solely in pursuit of this mission that I have dared to come to your home. Do you agree? What do you think, my lady? (生) 我與小娘子本圖諧二姓之歡, 永期百年之好。豈料家亡國破, 君繫臣囚, 幸用鄙人淺謀, 得放主公歸國。今吳王荒淫無度, 戀酒迷花。主公欲搆求美女, 以逞其欲。尋遍國內, 再無其人。我想起來, 只有小娘子儀容絕世, 傾國傾城, 偶爾稱揚, 主公遂有訪求之心, 小娘子尙無見許之意, 故敢特造高居, 奉問可否, 小娘子意下何如?

(Xi Shi): I am just a peasant girl, wearing a cotton skirt and a wooden hairpin; surely it is not right for me to go to [live in] a Chu palace or a Qin mansion? I can neither sing nor dance. Once upon a time I agreed to marry you, which was followed by three years of worry and sorrow. You, sir, are an official acting on behalf of the country; please go elsewhere to find someone to undertake this task. I am engaged to you and it would be impossible for me now to transfer my affections to another! (旦) 賤妾不過是田姑村婦, 裙布荆釵, 豈宜到楚館秦樓? 現不諳珠歌翠舞。雖當年既將身許, 三年遂患心疼。尊官爲國, 伏望別訪他求。賤妾爲身, 恐難移彼易此。

(Fan Li): How could I not appreciate your good intentions? But the survival of the country depends entirely upon this matter. If everything goes well, then the country will survive and I will live. Perhaps one day we will be able to meet again, who can say? If you persist in your refusal, the country will be destroyed and I will also die. Even if we were able to marry, my lady, we would just end up as dead bodies abandoned in ditches; how could we ever be happy? (生) 小娘子美意, 我豈不知? 但社稷廢興, 全賴此舉。若能飄然一往, 則國既可存, 我身亦可保。後會有期, 未可知也。若執而不行, 則國將遂滅, 我身亦旋亡。那時節雖結姻親, 小娘子, 我和你必同作溝渠之鬼, 又何暇求百年之歡乎?

(Xi Shi): Things may be as you say, but I have waited three years for you. Now finally we have been able to meet again, and I thought I would be able to achieve my heart's desire and marry you. Who would have guessed that further problems would arise, making me suffer yet more? (旦) 雖然如此, 但懸望三年, 今得一見, 意謂可了終身之願, 豈料又起風波, 好苦楚人也!

(To the tune of *Jinluosuo* 金落索):

三年曾結盟	Three years ago we made our vows,
百年圖歡慶	And planned to be happy together forever.
記得溪邊	I remember that beside the river
兩下親折證	The two of us exchanged love-tokens.
聞君滯此身在吳庭	When I heard that you had been detained at the Wu court,
害得心兒徹夜疼	I agonised day and night.
溪沙一縷曾相訂	Then we each took half a length of silk as a sign of our engagement,
何事兒郎太短情	What makes you so heartless now?
我真薄命	How bitter my fate!
天涯海角未曾經	I who have never travelled anywhere,
那時節異國飄零	Am now to be sent to spend my days drifting rootless in a foreign land!
音信無憑	Cut off from all news [from my loved ones],
落在深深井	It will be as if I have fallen into a deep, deep pit! ⁴¹

This passage draws on stories and themes from a number of different textual traditions in creating a dramatic situation. Xi Shi's beauty is the most ancient tradition, and here finds expression in the conventional phrase "*qingguo qingcheng* 傾國傾城" ([loveliness] such as can topple kingdoms and overturn cities). In a way, the use of such a hackneyed expression is highly appropriate, first because Xi Shi actually did play a significant role in bringing down the kingdom of Wu, and secondly that her beauty is nowhere described in any ancient text; she is just stereotypically said to have been superlatively lovely. The description given here of King Fuchai of Wu is in no way attractive; his alcoholism is probably derived from Tang-era characterisations of life at the Wu court, while the reference to his indulgence in sex seems to be highly unusual, particularly given the dominant tradition that he was

⁴¹ *Huansha ji*, p. 129. For an alternative translation of much of this act; see Cyril Birch, *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theatre of the Ming* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995), pp. 71-73. In the modern Kunju drama based on this play, *Xi Shi*, her disgust and horror at discovering what Fan Li wants her to do are even more strongly expressed; as discussed in Liu Wei 劉瑋, "Ping xinbian kunju *Xi Shi*: yi Xi Shi xingxiang wei zhongxin" 評新編昆劇西施: 以西施形象為中心, *Suzhou jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 蘇州教育學院學報 25.2 (2008), pp. 21-23.

enamored of Xi Shi to the exclusion of all other women.⁴² However, this appalling depiction of the king of Wu (borne out by his portrayal in the rest of the play), coupled with her openly expressed dismay at discovering Fan Li's heartlessness, is crucial for presenting Xi Shi's decision to train seriously for a career as a royal favorite as being motivated only by a sense of patriotic duty.⁴³ Of course, given that Fan Li refuses to marry her and has already recommended her to King Goujian, Xi Shi has little option other than to fall in with his wishes and travel to Wu to become the king's wife.⁴⁴ However, the terms in which Xi Shi's decision is described in *Huansha ji* completely eliminate any possibility that she might be attracted by the prospect of living in luxury at the Wu court.

For many modern scholars, Xi Shi as described in *Huansha ji* represents an "ordinary" woman sacrificed to the demands of the state, while Fan Li is concerned more with his own career than his fiancée's opinions and feelings.⁴⁵ Such an interpretation depends on discounting entirely what Fan Li says about the situation in which the couple found themselves; that with the country in such dire straits, regularly ravaged by the Wu army, any personal happiness can only be fleeting. Although on one level his decision to sacrifice Xi Shi is both selfish and heartless, from another perspective, it is entirely praiseworthy. Wu must be stopped and as events turned out, he was entirely correct in saying that Xi Shi was the woman to achieve this. The complexity of

⁴² There is only one ancient text which mentions King Fuchai of Wu's debauchery with women; see *Wu Yue chunqiu*, p. 147 ("Goujian yinmou waizhuan"). As a result of his association with the legendary beauty Xi Shi, King Fuchai of Wu is usually portrayed as a highly romantic figure. Regardless of the intrusion of the character of Fan Li, the last king of Wu is conventionally accounted as a great lover, determined to make his beloved Xi Shi happy. This perception endures to the present day, and informs many interpretations of both historical events and excavated artifacts. For example, in 1995 the Shanghai Museum purchased a bronze ewer known as the Wuwang Fuchai *he* 吳王夫差盃. The inscription on this vessel reads: "King Fuchai of the [Gou]wu smelted metal to make this vessel for his woman. Auspicious" 敵王夫差吳金鑄女子之器, 吉. This has been interpreted as a gift of love from King Fuchai of Wu to Xi Shi, particularly as no name is mentioned for the woman concerned; making it highly unlikely that it was made for an individual of high status. See Chen Peifen 陳佩芬, *Xia Shang Zhou qingtongqi yanjiu: Shanghai bowuguan zangpin* 夏商周青銅器研究: 上海博物館藏品 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), p. 194.

⁴³ For example in act thirty, "Cailian" 採蓮 (Gathering lotuses), Prime Minister Pi states that King Fuchai of Wu's harem is so overstuffed that in the summer it stinks to high heaven; see *Huansha ji*, p. 171.

⁴⁴ In *Huansha ji*, p. 157 ("Shibie" 施別), Xi Shi is said to have been presented to the Wu court as a Yue princess, thus suggesting that she became King Fuchai of Wu's principal wife.

⁴⁵ See for example Zhang Yanping 張艷萍, "Huansha ji xinlun: fanren yu yingxiong yiti de Xishi xingxiang" 浣紗記新論: 凡人與英雄一體的西施形象, *Xingtai xueyuan xuebao* 邢台學院學報 23.1 (2008, pp. 22-24), p. 23.

Fan Li's motives at this stage of the drama are mirrored by his multifarious reasons for eloping with Xi Shi at the end of the play.

The loneliness and unhappiness that Xi Shi imagines she will suffer are described in act twenty-three, and reoccur as important themes in act thirty "Cailian" 採蓮 (Gathering Lotuses) and in act thirty-four, "Huaigu" 懷古 (Remembering the Past). In the former, Xi Shi and King Fuchai are presented enjoying themselves on a boating expedition away from the royal palace. The arias and dialogue given to King Fuchai repeatedly stress his sexual infatuation with Xi Shi, and his inability to control his lust when in her presence. Xi Shi on the other hand sings of her love for her home and the man she left behind, and therefore the refrain that the two sing together repeatedly: "I hope that the two of us will love each other forever, just like a pair of mandarin ducks 惟願取雙雙繡綵, 長學鴛鴦" is ironic: King Fuchai is thinking of her, but she is thinking of Fan Li.⁴⁶ Finally a drunken king takes Xi Shi to his bed, supported by eunuchs and palace maids. As they leave the stage, the final lines are derived from Li Bai's "Wuqi qu," but what had once been written to describe the decadence of the Wu court is now transformed into words spoken by its very denizens:

- (淨) 銀箭金壺漏水多 (Fuchai): As the silver arrow sinks within
the golden clepsydra, many moments drip away,
(旦) 試看涼月墜紅波 (Xi Shi): We arise to see the cold moon
sinking into the reddened waves.
(眾) 吳歌楚舞歡未畢 (Eunuchs and Maids): Wu songs and Chu
dances provide endless entertainment.
(合) 東方漸高奈樂何 (All): As [the sun] gradually rises in the
east, where will we seek pleasure next?⁴⁷

In contrast to the situation in act thirty, where Xi Shi is presented surrounded by other people and her longings for her lover have to be couched in ambiguous terms, the monologue which she delivers in act thirty-four emphasises the stress that she labors under at the Wu court, entrusted with a mission of vital importance that she has been left to carry out without any support or advice. The lack of news from home torments Xi Shi, who being confined within the royal harem, is not in a position to know if Yue's plans have succeeded. Confronting the possibility that her self-sacrifice might be in vain provides Xi Shi with an exceptionally poignant moment in the play, illustrating the difficulties of being a protagonist in historical events beyond one's control. This act places the audience in a privileged position, knowing that Xi Shi will

⁴⁶ See *Huansha ji*, pp. 172–73.

⁴⁷ *Huansha ji*, p. 174.

soon be released from her suffering and thus enabling them to enjoy the pathos created by her ignorance. It also creates a strong contrast with the next act, “Wei Wu” 圍吳 (Laying Siege to Wu), which marks a turning-point as the action moves towards the finale:

[旦, to the tune *Qianqiusui* 千秋歲]:

無奈被他身束縛	Against my will I have been possessed by another,
無奈被他情擔擱	Forced to stay here at the beck and call of someone else,
可惜風流聰閑却 當初漫留溪上語	Alas! I cannot accept this life of luxury. Then we walked slowly together and talked beside the river,
而今誤我樓頭約	Now he has betrayed the betrothal that we made beside the pavilion.
夢闌時, 酒醒後	When I wake from my dreams, when I am roused from my drunkenness
思量着	This dominates my thoughts!

Since I, Xi Shi, first came to Wu, three years have passed. I accepted the commands of my king, I remember the words spoken by Fan Li when he instructed me how to seduce the king of Wu and make him lose his way in unbridled debauch. Now the sights of Wu's decline can be seen on every side, but the months and years continue to slip by, and the end is not in sight. I do not know whether my parents are safe and sound! I do not know if Master Fan has succeeded or not! I don't even know if my country has recovered! It has correctly been said that once the goddesses of Hangao [Mountain] have gone, there is no point in them having left jade trinkets behind.⁴⁸ We once walked by the Zhe River, our silk love-token survives to prove it. What torment this is!⁴⁹ 我西施自從到吳, 不覺三載, 領本國主公之命, 記范蠡相公之言, 教我哄誘吳王, 恣意淫樂, 眼見得吳國將有敗亡之兆了。但歲月淹留, 歸期未卜, 一向不知我父母安否何如? 不知范相公功業何如? 又不知我國家興復事何如? 正是, 漢臯仙去, 環珮空留; 浙水人遙, 溪紗猶在。好傷感人也呵!

⁴⁸ According to legend, a man from Zheng named Jiao Fu 交甫 was walking near Han'gao Tower 漢臯臺 when he met two goddesses. They gave him gems hanging from their belts as a memento, but when they disappeared so did the jewels. Although this story is usually attributed to the *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (Mr. Han's Outer Exposition of the Book of Songs) it is not found in the transmitted text. The story is however mentioned in such texts as Zhang Heng's 張衡 (78-139) *Nandu fu* 南都賦 (Southern Capital Rhapsody; see Li Shan 李善 et al., *Wenxuan zhushi* 文選注釋 (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971), p. 50. The gems concerned are usually said to have been pearls rather than jade.

⁴⁹ *Huansha ji*, pp. 199-200.

In the final act of the play, “Guihu” 歸湖 (Returning to the Lakes), Fan Li and Xi Shi prepare to leave the kingdom of Yue forever. For Xi Shi, this is the climax of her long drawn-out romance; having been parted for so many years for reasons of state, finally she is going to be allowed to rejoin Fan Li. In their conversation before getting on the boat that will carry them away, they recall their first meeting some nine years earlier, and the promises they made to each other. This scene is crucial for demonstrating Xi Shi’s virtue; at no stage has she been corrupted by the splendors of the Wu court and throughout the years she has remained loyal at heart to Fan Li:

(Xi Shi): If all those years ago I had not gone to the river to wash silk, would we be together today? (旦) 當初若無溪紗，我與你那有今日？

(Fan Li): Where is your piece of silk? (生) 你那紗在何處？

(Xi Shi): I have guarded it day and night, keeping it next to my heart as you see. (旦) 妾朝夕愛護，佩在心胸，君試觀之

(Fan Li): I too have kept my piece there. (生) 我的紗也在此。

千業萬結亂如堆 Though duties and obligations accumulated in profusion,

曾繫吳宮合巹杯 This connected us even when you drank the marriage cup in the Wu palace.

今日兩歸溪水上 Today the two of us set off for the lakes;

方知一縷是良媒 Who would have guessed that a length of silk would prove such a good matchmaker!⁵⁰

However, in keeping with the complex and ambiguous portrayal of *Huansha ji*’s characters, all is not necessarily as it seems. Although Xi Shi may imagine that this is a romantic reunion for herself and her fiancé, there are strong reasons that make it advisable for Fan Li to leave the kingdom of Yue in a hurry. King Goujian was a difficult master to serve in the years following his victory over the kingdom of Wu; among his victims was Grandee Zhong, who was ordered to commit suicide.⁵¹ This was foreseen by Fan Li, who sent him a letter of warning. Fan Li’s determination to leave Yue might therefore be seen as an act of self-preservation. His decision to leave with Xi Shi is also not entirely motivated by affection for her. In his opening lines in the final act, Fan Li claims that he has made up his mind to elope with her to prevent her from leading King Goujian astray.⁵² Having so success-

⁵⁰ *Huansha ji*, p. 249.

⁵¹ See for example *Shiji*, 41, p. 1746; *Wu Yue chungiu*, pp. 175–76 (“Goujian fa Wu wai-zhuan” 勾踐伐吳外傳).

⁵² See *Huansha ji*, p. 248.

fully seduced King Fuchai of Wu, Xi Shi's distracting presence in the kingdom of Yue represents a threat to national security. Fan Li's actions are therefore not a sign of love for the woman he has pledged to marry; they represent an exceptional level of patriotism and devotion to the interests of his adopted country. The threat of execution by King Goujian may or may not be carried out, but by leaving, Fan Li certainly loses everything that he has worked so hard to achieve over the course of many years.⁵³ However, if he were to take Xi Shi away with him solely because he was interested in pursuing a romantic relationship, that might leave him open to charges of selfishness and lust.⁵⁴ By presenting Fan Li's actions as motivated by a wish to save King Goujian from danger, his disappearance from political life becomes an act of great self-sacrifice.

XI SHI IN THE FICTION WORKS *XIN LIEGUO ZHI* AND *QINGSHI*

Feng Menglong's *Xin lieguo zhi*, a popular novelization in 108 chapters concerning the history of the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States era, naturally contains a section which describes the conflict between Wu and Yue.⁵⁵ In accordance with the focus of the historical texts used by the author, Wu Zixu is the key protagonist in these events.⁵⁶ In its treatment of the character of Xi Shi, the novel represents an interesting return to older textual traditions (again in keeping with the early-imperial sources), and so Xi Shi is both a comparatively minor figure and robbed of most of her biography that had been so laboriously constructed over the course of the centuries. Thus

⁵³ The complex motivations for Fan Li to leave Yue which are recounted in the final acts of the *Huansha ji* have their echoes earlier on in the play. For example, when Fan Li goes to persuade Xi Shi to go to Wu, one of the key reasons he wishes her to do this is that it will help his career. See *Huansha ji*, pp. 129–30 (“Pin Shi”). Thus though his primary motive may be patriotic, his actions are not without self-interest and some moral ambiguity.

⁵⁴ The issue of the way imperial-era writers avoided portraying Fan Li's actions as selfish is considered in Xia Tingxian 夏廷獻, *Fan Li* 范蠡 (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1995), p. 288.

⁵⁵ This novel is now much better known through the Qing-era revision entitled *Dong Zhou lieguo zhi* 東周列國志 (History of the Kingdoms and States of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty) by Cai Yuanfang 蔡元放 (fl. 1740s). For a discussion of the textual history of *Dong Zhou lieguo zhi*; see Zeng Liang 曾良, *Dong Zhou lieguo zhi yanjiu* 東周列國志研究 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu chubanshe, 1998), pp. 55–65. See also Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1981), pp. 100–1; and Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1988), p. 52. The portrayal of Xi Shi in the *Dong Zhou lieguo zhi* abridgement is very similar to that found in Feng Menglong's original text.

⁵⁶ Wu Zixu is by far the best recorded individual in the history of the Spring and Autumn period; see Barry Blakeley, “Chu Society and State: Image versus Reality,” in Constance Cook and John S. Major, eds., *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999, pp. 51–66), p. 66.

throughout her story, Xi Shi is again presented as a silent beauty; her thoughts and opinions located somewhere beyond the narrative given. Feng Menglong's reliance on ancient texts as a basis for the novel should however not blind the reader to the changes that he introduces into his portrayal of Xi Shi. The character of Xi Shi in *Xin lieguo zhi* contains certain elements derived from other Ming dynasty depictions, in particular Liang Chenyu's *Huansha ji*. This can be seen particularly in the final denouement when she is brought back to Yue by King Goujian with the object of having her grace his own harem.⁵⁷ In *Huansha ji*, this dangerous possibility is one of the factors forcing Fan Li to leave Yue. However, Feng Menglong's novelization describes an unusually miserable fate for Xi Shi, devoid of the romanticism of Liang Chenyu's account.

Xin lieguo zhi's portrayal of Xi Shi is much simpler than those in many other late-imperial accounts. In part this is no doubt due to the constraints of space; this novel covers five hundred years of history and describes events in a dozen or more different countries. Similarly, many early-imperial era additions to Xi Shi's biography were ruthlessly excised in favor of a narrative structure related to that given in the "Jiushu" chapter of *Yuejue shu*, whereby the presentation of beautiful women is described as just one of the many plans Yue undertook to mislead and delude King Fuchai of Wu. Thus, Xi Shi's early meetings with Fan Li and their love for each other form a subplot that has been eliminated in favor of describing how the kingdom of Yue was searched for two superlatively beautiful women, which turned up Xi Shi and Zheng Dan. Though their ultimate duty is to seduce the king of Wu, before they leave the country they are used to refill the coffers of the kingdom of Yue. Fan Li is described as setting up what can perhaps best be described as a peep-show, at which anyone wishing to see this pair of beauties has to pay a coin.⁵⁸ While being stared at by gawping men was no doubt excellent training for their future role in Wu, the sudden transformation here of Fan Li into something approaching a side-show barker is most remarkable.

Exactly the same story is given in the "Qingsi" 情私 (Clandestine Relationships) section of *Qingshi*, which records how Fan Li first made money out of Xi Shi and then seduced her en route to the kingdom of Wu, resulting in her giving birth to a baby.⁵⁹ Although in the concluding

⁵⁷ See Wei Tongxian 魏同賢, ed., *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), p. 1026.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 982.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 86.

remarks of this entry, Feng Menglong expresses disbelief at the idea that after spending three years training Xi Shi, Fan Li would have further delayed matters by getting her pregnant, such is the tale as given. In her study of this text, Hua-yuan Li Mowry notes that the focus of most of the stories are on illicit relationships where the couple concerned end in disgrace only when they try to escape from the consequences of their actions.⁶⁰ In the case of the story of Fan Li, the emphasis is not on his love for Xi Shi (which must be kept secret from King Fuchai lest both her mission and her life be endangered) and their ultimate reunion after the fall of Wu, but upon his exploitation of her first for commercial gain and then for sexual gratification. In this account his staggeringly selfish actions go completely uncensured.

As mentioned above, *Qingshi* provides a ghost story involving Xi Shi. In addition to the famous tale of her manifestation to two Liang dynasty scholars, there is another much less well-known Yuan-dynasty ghost story which Feng Menglong also quotes. This story was originally derived from an obscure text entitled *Pingjiang jishi* 平江記事 (Record of Events in the City of Pingjiang [Suzhou]) by Gao Deji 高德基 (dates unknown), and is said to have taken place in the year 1328. Two gentlemen named Yang Yancai 楊彥采 and Lu Shengzhi 陸升之 are said to have been out on a boating expedition when they encountered an exceptionally beautiful young woman playing a pipa. After chatting with her for a while, they persuaded her to sing for them. Given their location in the vicinity of the city of Suzhou, the woman suggested that she sing about Xi Shi, and thus performed a song cycle in which a number of the most famous Tang poems about Xi Shi are set to music. The first song is Li Bai's "Kouhao Wuwang meiren banzui" translated above, followed by "Wucheng langu" 吳城覽古 (Contemplating Antiquity at Wu City) by Chen Yu 陳羽 (*jinshi* 792), "Yi chuncao" 憶春草 (Remembering Spring Grasses) by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842), "Guanwagong huaigu" 館娃宮懷古 (Cherishing Antiquity at Lodging Beauties Palace) by Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (c. 834-883), "Changzhou yuan" 長洲苑 (The Gardens of Changzhou) by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), "He Guanwagong huaigu" 和館娃宮懷古 (Harmonizing with "Cherishing Antiquity at Lodging Beauties Palace") by Lu Guimeng 陸龜夢 (d. 881), "Sutai langu" 蘇臺覽古 (Contemplating Antiquity at [Gu]su Tower) by Li Bai again, and finally the poem "Xi Shi dong" 西施洞 (Xi Shi's Cave) by Luo Yin 羅陰 (833-909).

⁶⁰ Hua-yuan Li Mowry, *Chinese Love Stories from Ch'ing-shih* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983), pp. 48-49.

Having performed this remarkably well-chosen selection, the young woman finally sang a song of her own composition, suggesting that she was the shade of none other than Xi Shi herself, before throwing herself into the water. This startled Yang Yancai so much that he woke up in a cold sweat, only to discover that it had all been a dream.⁶¹ The poems in the song sequence are ordered so that they form a narrative pattern, beginning with accounts of the drunken beauty enjoying a life of luxury, moving through the destruction of the kingdom by the forces of King Goujian of Yue, on to accounts of the desolation and ruin of the Wu palaces, overgrown with thistles and brambles, and culminating in Luo Yin's plea that Xi Shi should not be blamed for this turn of events. The pivotal poem in this sequence is the one by Pi Rixiu, which imagines the inhabitants of the Wu palace interrupted at their revels by a massacre. Though in many works of literature about the Wu palace, the ultimate fate of King Fuchai and his court hangs over the images of pleasure and debauchery like the sword of Damocles, very few imperial-era writers did actually confront, as Pi does here, the issue of how to portray their tragic end:

半夜娃宮作戰場	In the middle of the night, the [Lodging] Beauties Palace becomes a battlefield,
血染猶雜宴時香	The stench of blood still mingles with the incense lit for a banquet.
西施不及燒殘燭	Xi Shi has no time to relight the broken lamps,
猶爲君王泣數行	Yet she cries a few tears for her husband, the king. ⁶²

When the *Qingshi* ghost story imagines that Xi Shi has spent the years since her demise in becoming thoroughly familiar with the greatest works of literature in which she figures, this conceit is used for considerable rhetorical effect. Just as in *Huansha ji*, words originally written about her take on a new power when spoken by Xi Shi herself. However, in *Xin lieguo zhi*, the strategy of quoting poetry about famous historical figures is used in a somewhat different way. This text contains a lengthy description of Xi Shi's life at the Wu court, which is evoked partly through Feng Menglong's own prose, and partly by quoting a number of classic poetic works on the subject. In a long passage, only part of which is translated below, Feng Menglong emphasises both the

⁶¹ See Gao Deji 高德基, *Pingjiang jishi* 平江記事, in Wang Jiaju 王稼句, ed., *Suzhou wenxian congchao chubian* 蘇州文獻叢鈔初編 (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2005, pp. 141-54), pp. 153-54; see also Feng, *Qingshi*, pp. 744-46.

⁶² This poem is also quoted in Pi Rixiu 皮日休 and Lu Guimeng 陸龜夢, *Songling ji* 松陵集 (SKQS edn.) 7, pp. 18a-b.

decadent pleasures of the Wu court, and the extravagant favor shown to the beautiful Xi Shi by the besotted King Fuchai. This is done through an extensive description of the Lodging Beauties Palace which is supposed to have been built by order of the king of Wu to house his favorite.⁶³ Each short prose passage contains the name of a particular site in or around the palace, describes the nature of the association with Fuchai and Xi Shi, and then concludes with a quoted classic poem. Here the king helped Xi Shi with her makeup, here they played music together, here they picked flowers, here they went boating, here they went hunting, and so on. By sheer accumulation, the luxuries and attention lavished on the royal favorite come to seem ever more excessive:

It is said that when [King] Fuchai favored Xi Shi, he ordered the Royal Grandson Xiong to build Lodging Beauties palace at the very top of Numinous Cliff.⁶⁴ It had bronze gutters and jade pillars, and was ornamented with pearls and jade; it was a place where his concubine could relax and enjoy herself...⁶⁵ Gao Qi's (1336–1374) “Guanwa Gong shi” (Poem on the Lodging Beauties Palace) reads: 且說夫差寵幸西施，令王孫雄特建館娃宮於靈巖之山。銅溝玉檻，飾以珠玉，為美人遊息之所... 高啓“館娃宮詩”云

館娃宮中館娃閣	At the Lodging Beauties Palace there is a Lodging Beauties Pavilion,
畫棟侵雲峰頂開	Its painted beams pierce the heavens and cleave the mountains.
猶恨當時高未極	How bitter that it was not high enough then,
不能望見越兵來	That they could look into the distance and see the arrival of the Yue troops!

⁶³ The earliest known reference to King Fuchai's palace is found in the *Fangyan* 方言 (Regional Speech) dictionary by Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), which provides a gloss on the unusual Wu dialect word *wa* 娃; see Yang Xiong, *Fangyan* (CSJC edn.) 2, p. 13. The somewhat bizarre fact that the first reference to this site is made in a dictionary suggests that it was still extremely famous in the Han dynasty, though the corresponding literary references have not survived. Thus Lodging Beauties Palace is first mentioned in Chinese literature in “Wudu fu” 吳都賦 (Rhapsody on the Wu Capital) by Zuo Si 左思 (250–305). See Li Shan et al., *Wenxuan*, p. 75. For a translation of this passage; see David Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature, Volume One: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1982), p. 421.

⁶⁴ Wangsun Xiong (also known as Wangsun Luo 王孫駱/雒 or Gongsun Xiong 公孫雄) was an important figure at King Fuchai of Wu's court mentioned in a number of ancient texts; see for example *Guoyu*, p. 606 (“Wuyu” 吳語); *Shiji*, 41, p. 1744; and *Yuejue shu*, p. 39 (“Qingdi” 請纒). For some reason Feng Menglong favored the version of the name given in *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei); see Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 97 (“Dangran” 當染). The association of Wangsun Xiong with the building of Lodging Beauties Palace seems to be unique to *Xin lieguo zhi*.

⁶⁵ This description is a direct quotation from Ren Fang's 任昉 (460–508) *Shuyi ji* 述異記 (Record of Strange Things); see Ren Fang 任昉, *Shuyi ji* 述異記 (SKQS edn.) *shang* 上, p. 9a.

... On top of this mountain there is Enjoying the Flowers Pond, and Enjoying the Moon Pond.⁶⁶ There is also a well, which they call the King of Wu's Well; the well water is pure and blue, Xi Shi sometimes used the reflections in the water when she was putting on her makeup.⁶⁷ Fuchai stood by her side and personally arranged her hair. Yang Bei (dates unknown) wrote a poem that reads: 山上有翫花池, 翫月池. 又有井名吳王井. 井泉清碧, 西施或照泉而妝. 夫差立於旁, 親為理髮. 楊備有詩云

石磴遺縱旁古臺	Stones and bricks lie abandoned beside the ancient tower,
一泓寒影鑒光開	Cold shadows on these limpid waters form a shining mirror.
何人照面金釵落	Whose face was here reflected as she rearranged her golden hairpins?
曾見越溪紅粉來	See her rouge carried along the Yue River! ⁶⁸

There is also a cave called the Xi Shi Cave – Fuchai and Xi Shi sat together here.⁶⁹ Outside the cave there is a stone with a small depression in it, this is now popularly known as Xi Shi's footprint. Gao Qi wrote a poem that reads: 又有洞名西施洞, 夫差與西施同坐於此. 洞外石有小陷, 今俗名西施跡. 高啓有詩云

廢宮春水長蒼苔 The moss grows thickly beside the spring pool
in the ruined palace,

⁶⁶ The presence of these water-features is first mentioned in Lu Guangwei, *Wudi ji*, p. 67. However, their names are first recorded in the Song dynasty gazetteer *Wujun tujing xuji* 吳郡圖經續記 (Supplement to the Illustrated Record of Wu Commandary); see Zhu Changwen 朱長文, *Wujun tujing xuji* 吳郡圖經續記 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), p. 43.

⁶⁷ Confusingly, since at least the time of the Ming dynasty there have been two wells at Numinous Cliff, one circular and one octagonal, both of which are now known as the King of Wu's Well. The earliest reference to this pair of wells seems to be in Wang Ao 王鏊 et al., *Gusu zhi* 姑蘇志 (Vol. 3; Shanghai: Shanghai shuju, 1990), p. 119. The pair of wells is also described in Yuan Hongdao's 袁宏道 (1568–1610) essay: “Lingyan ji” 靈巖記 (A Record of Numinous Cliff); see Yang Xunji 楊循吉 et al., eds., *Wuzhong xiaozhi congkan* 吳中小志叢刊 (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2004), p. 288. According to the 1947 gazettee *Suzhou Lingyanshan zhi* 蘇州靈巖山志 (Gazettee for Numinous Cliff Mountain at Suzhou) only the round well, also known as the Richi 日池 (Sun Pond) should correctly be known as the King of Wu's Well. The octagonal well, also known as the Yuechi 月池 (Moon Pond), is more properly known as the Zhiji Jing 智積井 (Zhiji [Bodhisattva] Well). See Zhang Yiliu 張一留, *Suzhou Lingyanshan zhi* 蘇州靈巖山志 (Suzhou: Lingyanshan si, [1947] 1994), pp. 8–9.

⁶⁸ This would seem to be a feminization of the Yuelaixi 越來溪 (literally Yue Access River), that is the route taken by the army as they launched their attack on Wu; see Zhengxie Suzhoushi Huqiuqu weiyuanhui 政協蘇州市虎丘山委員會, ed., *Shihu shang Fangshan* 石湖上方山 (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2000), pp. 21–22.

⁶⁹ Xi Shi's cave is first mentioned as one of the sights at Numinous Cliff in the Song gazetteer *Wujun zhi* 吳郡志 (Gazetteer for Wu Commandary); see Fan Chengda 范成大, *Wujun zhi* 吳郡志 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), p. 105.

不見羅裙拂地來 I will never see her silk skirt come sweeping
across the ground.

只恐西施是仙子 And yet maybe Xi Shi has become a fairy,
洞中別自有樓臺 Living in her own palace inside this cave.

[King Fuchai] also once played the *qin* with Xi Shi at the mountain's peak, now there is a Qin Tower [here]. Zhang Yu (1333–1385) wrote a poem that reads: 又嘗與西施鳴琴於山巔，今有琴臺。張羽詩云

坐鼓朱擘日	Sitting and strumming the <i>qin</i> by day, ⁷⁰
玉人方入吳	Just as the beauty was about to enter Wu.
於今山月下	Today on this mountain beneath the moon,
惟聽夜啼烏	All I hear is the cawing of the crows at night. ⁷¹

According to *Xin lieguo zhi*, Xi Shi's final destination after the fall of Wu was not a happy reunion with her lover Fan Li, but instead to be murdered by order of the queen of Yue, fearing her malign influence should she enter King Goujian's harem. Feng Menglong discusses two other versions of the story of Xi Shi's final destiny, one – related to *Huansha ji* – which states that Fan Li removed her from King Goujian's harem for fear that she would delude him; this is dismissed on the grounds that he would not have dared to elope with a royal concubine. The second story suggests that Fan Li himself drowned Xi Shi out of patriotic motives; this too is dismissed as apocryphal. This short discussion of the various fates attributed to Xi Shi in popular traditions ends with the same poem by Luo Yin as found in the *Qingshi* supernatural story described above:

家國興亡自有時	The rise and fall of kingdoms has its own logic,
時人何苦咎西施	Why do people blame Xi Shi?
西施若解亡吳國	Even if Xi Shi was indeed responsible for the fall of Wu,
越國亡來又是誰	Who do we blame for the fall of Yue? ⁷²

The portrayal of Xi Shi in *Xin lieguo zhi* is one of the most miserable in imperial Chinese literature. Exploited at every turn, she nevertheless does everything that is asked of her and bewitches the king of Wu to his doom. Her reward for this is to be transferred straight into King Goujian of Yue's own harem so that she may continue her

⁷⁰ This translation follows the alternative version of the wording of the first line of the poem, given in Feng Menglong, *Xin lieguo zhi* (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2010), p. 906.

⁷¹ Feng, *Xin lieguo zhi*, pp. 986–87.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 1026.

life as a sex object; for this she is murdered by the queen of Yue. The queen's words as she orders Xi Shi's death are enlightening in view of the commodification of the beauty that is seen in the *Xin lieguo zhi* account, which consistently describes her as an object traded between enemy countries: "This (Xi Shi) is a thing from a country that has been destroyed, why should we keep it? 此亡國之物留之何爲"⁷³ The use of the word "thing" (*wu* 物) in this line serves to sum up the degradation that Xi Shi suffers in this account, which does not even allow her the illusion of a happy reunion with Fan Li.

CONCLUSION

Xi Shi is a disturbing figure in Chinese history. She represents at once the destructive power of beauty, a theme common to other famous royal favorites such as Mo Ji and Bao Si, and the danger posed by an alien presence at the very highest levels of power. Though these other women brought destruction on the nation they did so out of ignorance, oblivious to the consequences of their actions. For the sake of short-term selfish gains within the harem hierarchy, or to pander to the tastes and interests of their royal husbands, they were prepared to flout all rules of decent behavior. Xi Shi on the other hand represents a much more subtle kind of danger. Her primary status within every biographical story told about her is as a subject of the defeated and humiliated king of Yue; she was presented to the king of Wu as part of a plot that would see the restoration of her own ruler's honor and prestige. Xi Shi is therefore uncorrupted by the luxuries and wealth with which she is surrounded at the court of Wu, or rather corruption is not an issue. Given that every extravagance on the part of King Fuchai brings her one step closer to her ultimate goal of bringing about the destruction of the kingdom of Wu, her seductive presence in his harem represents a living embodiment of the determination of Yue to avenge their defeat at Kuaiji Mountain.

Xi Shi's cultural legacy during the long unfolding of Chinese literature during the imperial period turned out to be enormous. No doubt this is due at least in part to the perennial popularity of the tale of the downfall of the kingdom of Wu, but it is also a reflection of the ease with which romantic legends could build up around her. Given her silence as depicted in the earlier accounts of her life and the paucity of information other than her humble origins and great beauty, there

⁷³ Ibid.

was plenty of space in which imperial-era writers could project their own images of her and adapt her character to fit new ideas of femininity, self-sacrifice, or concerns about the exploitation of women. This process continued throughout the imperial period and into the present day, though the later developments do not fall within the scope of this article. The Ming representations of Xi Shi discussed here focus on the theme of the exploitation of beautiful Xi Shi, but while the *Huansha ji* character is allowed the dignity of accepting her role out of patriotic motives, in the *Xin lieguo zhi* version, even this is denied her, and she is once again a silent pawn. Where in earlier accounts her silence allows the imagination free rein, in Feng Menglong's masterpiece, Xi Shi's silence underlines her objectification; words are unwanted in a beautiful thing traded between one country and another. By late-Ming times, when Xi Shi's biography had become fully fleshed, her silence serves to highlight her suffering.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Huansha ji</i>	Zhang Chenshi 張忱石 et al., <i>Huansha ji jiaozhu</i> 浣紗記校注
<i>Li Bai</i>	<i>Li Bai ji jiaozhu</i> 李白集校注
<i>Wu Yue chungiu</i>	Zhou Shengchun 周生春, <i>Wu Yue chungiu jijiao hui kao</i> 吳越春秋輯校匯考
<i>Yuejue shu</i>	Yuan Kang 袁康, Wu Ping 吳平, <i>Yuejue shu</i> 越絕書