

Paul A. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China*, University of California Press, 2009, 354 pp.

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If you look for a definition in English of the Chinese term “cheng yu”, you find among many other ones, from Chinese-tools.com: “Chinese idioms or chengyu are short sayings usually consisting of four characters.” Then it is added “Unless you know the story and its common usage, a chengyu will sound like random nonsense.” Finally, the presentation advertises: “Here are some chengyu stories, as taught to Chinese students...” So they are idioms, not exactly proverbs which is another entry in Chinese-tools.com. As such, impossible to understand if not explained from the story in which they originate. Taught from generation to generation, they are part and parcel of the common cultural stock of those people more or less educated in the same cultural milieu. These characteristics fit exactly the chengyu explained in the book about King Goujian: “Sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall.”

The first chapter gives the so-called historical background, or relates how the story was already narrated in antiquity, as the author says in the title. In enough details, but without insisting on subtleties like the various possible pronunciation of kuai or gui in Mount Kuaiji. The story is summarized in a few line of the foreword, by John R. Gillis: “Goujian, the King of Yue, who was utterly defeated by the powerful ruler of neighboring

柯文,《对话历史: 二十世纪中国的越王勾践之故事》,加州大学出版社,2009年,354页。

**狄明德**

英语中对汉语里“成语”一词有许多定义,其中 Chinese-tools.com 的定义是:“汉语里的成语是指通常由四个汉字构成的短语。”接着它又补充道“除非你了解一个成语后的故事和其常见用法,否则它听上去就象是毫无意义的汉字的随机组合。”末尾的广告是:“这里是中国学生所学的一些成语.....”所以这些是成语,绝非 Chinese-tools.com 的另一词条谚语。正因如此,成语如果没有对其渊源的解释是不可能理解的。代代相传的成语现在已经成为同一文化环境中受教程度不同的人日常文化用语的重要组成部分。书中对关于越王勾践的成语“卧薪尝胆”的解释充分体现了成语的这些特点。

第一章给出了所谓的历史背景,或,正如作者标题所扣的,古代时对该故事的叙述,详尽却并未一味追究细微末节,比如会稽山的“会”的几种可能的发音。约翰 R·吉利斯在书序中提及故事的梗概:“越王勾践,大败于强大的邻国吴王手下后,幸免一死,其后日日卧薪尝胆,最终获胜而报仇雪耻。”(xi - xii)

kingdom of Wu, survives, and ultimately triumphs over humiliation by submitting himself to the practice of “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall” (woxin changdan).”(pp. xi-xii)

So the idiom comes from the painful but in the long term rewarding experience that goals, with a single mind, are attainable with perseverance, helped along the road by practical means to remember the end. Now, and most interestingly, what Cohen remarkably does is to recall why the chengyu was and still is taught to Chinese students, or more generally to Chinese people and how the “common usage” actually has become different while stubbornly remaining apparently the same.

Cohen takes the reader from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the present day, from the “Burden of National Humiliation” (Ch. 2), to Taiwan under the exiled Chiang Kai-shek (Ch. 3), then back on the Mainland in the early 1960’ (Ch. 4), and the 1980’ with the use of the story as political allegory (Ch. 5), and present time when the Goujian story supports the economic privatization. It is extraordinary to witness page after page the polyvalence of the same idiom: impossible really to decide who is right or wrong in the interpretation of it, sometimes justified by re-writing or editing the “original” story. But that, of course, is not what matters!

Read pp. 138-139: in Taiwan, the Goujian story, understandably, was “explicitly cast as part of the ideological of the Republic of

故这个成语起源于痛苦却有长远回报的经历，即，只要一心一意，持之以恒，辅以时时提醒自己目标的可行的做法，则目标是会实现的。如今，柯文的卓越之处在于，也是最有意思的是，他回想这个成语之所以在过去以及现在仍在灌输给中国学生或整个中国大众的原因，以及尽管成语仍固守着其表面形式，但其“常见用法”实际上已发生了变化。

柯文引领读者穿越历史长河，从十九世纪末直至今日，从“肩负国耻”（第二章）至流亡蒋介石领导下的台湾（第三章），接着回到十九世纪六十年代初期的中国大陆（第四章），作为该故事政治比喻的十九世纪八十年代（第五章），及勾践之故事支持下的经济私有化的现在。逐页读来，目睹同一成语在诸多方面的引用是件非比寻常的事：真正要确定对它的解释谁对谁非是不可能的，尽管有时候对“原”故事的重写或编辑是有道理的。当然，那些都无关紧要！

参见第 138-139 页：可以理解地，在台湾，勾践的故事“显然是中华民国用以对抗大陆中共统治的意

China in its on-going battle against Communist rule on the Mainland.” During the same period, the story supported, on the Mainland, a policy of self-reliance and independence. As said above, in the second chapter, one understands that Goujian was presented as accepting harshness and humiliation of all kind with the clear and only purpose o take revenge when time is ripe for it (p.56)...Now-a-day, the same story serves to teach people not to be discouraged by setbacks in a competitive society; success comes by hard work and patience (p.224).

In brief, it is eminently correct to understand a chengyu as taught to Chinese people. Many different meanings are here present, very often emphasizing one or another aspect of an elusive “primitive script.” There is nothing strange that such idioms are in the bones of Chinese people, as one says (p.xix). The contrary would signal a dramatic failure of any sense of education. Still, today, you pronounce the first character of the chengyu, and the rest follow suit immediately from the mouth of any moderately educated Chinese. But, when asked the meaning of the idiom, this or that explanation may come according to personal situation or appreciation of issues affecting their own life, and even more the whole country. Sometime, because of mental disorder (p.203); sometime to boast economic development with patriotic characteristics (p. 206 and 222).

Cohen search in a huge Chinese database resulted in a flood of references to Goujian and *woxichangdan* (p.220). A sign that indeed

识形态的一部分。”在同一时期的大陆，这个故事却支持自力更生的政策。如前所述，在第二章，人们理解的勾践的形象是，忍辱受苦，意志坚定，目标如一，等待时机成熟，报仇雪耻（第 56 页）.....如今这一故事教育人们在社会竞争中在困难面前不要灰心丧气；成功来自于努力与耐性（第 224 页）。

简言之，正确的做法是以中国人学习成语的方式去理解一个成语。目前成语有诸多不同的意义，通常强调其令人困惑的“原稿”的某一方面。如(p.xix)页所述，毫不奇怪，这些成语已深入中国人的骨髓，否则就象征了任何意义上的教育的极大失败。现在，一如既往地，只要你说出成语的头一个字，其余的就会从任何一个受过中等教育的中国人口中脱口而出。可是，如果被问及成语的意义，就可能出现这样或那样的解释，取决于个人的处境或对影响个人生活的事件的看法，甚至是对于国家大事的看法。有时候，是因为思维紊乱（第 203 页）；有时是带有爱国主义色彩的对经济发展的夸耀（第 206、222 页）。

柯文对大量的汉语资料的研究发现，对勾践和卧薪尝胆（第 220 页）的引用是屡见不鲜，表明这

the two are part of a common Chinese cultural language and stock of reference. Along all the developments so richly elaborated by Cohen, a question seems recurrent: what is so extraordinary in such a use of reference, or catch words, in a cultural milieu? The stereotype does not reside in the content of the phrase, but more in the plastic form of the idiom. As signifier with a signified always slipping under it, to use Saussure famous linguistic remark. A culture needs a vocabulary to be kept alive, since culture may well be defined as an on-going conversation. Idioms offer themselves as conversational tools, which cannot be reduced to their materiality or seen as empty shells waiting for some substance. There is a story in them, but a story which cannot be of cultural significance if it is not told and retold again and again, and so prone to a wide range of “variation on the same theme.”

The conclusion, “Cross-Cultural Perspectives”, engage the discussion of the singularity of Chinese chengyu and the versatility and all-purpose presence of “historical” cultural stories, in comparison with, for example, the Massada story of Jewish people. Maybe Chinese people are using more cultural idioms, their chengyu, than others? One of the final sentence of the book, “Narratives like the Goujian story are terrible important” (p.240) appears at first a little be naïve from an historian; it is a very important reminder that to understand what is going on in society it is imperative to listen to what people say, and how they say it.

两个词是常见的汉语文化用语并经常被引用。柯文在详尽阐述这些研究进展的同时，似乎在不断提这样一个问题：在一个文化环境中这样的引用有何不同寻常之处？这个陈词滥调并非存在于成语的内容，而更多的是成语的可塑的形式。套用索绪尔的语言学名句，符徵下经常游走的是符旨，所以，文化的生存需要词汇，因为文化完全可以被界定为一场进行中的对话。成语自身成为对话的工具，不能被局限为只是工具而已或是等待物质到来的空壳。成语里有故事，但是这个故事不会有文化意义，除非故事在一而再地被传播，并且倾向于在一个宽广的范围内发生着“同一主题的变异。”

结语—“跨文化观点”探讨了汉语成语的独特性以及相比较于犹太人的玛萨达故事等的“历史”文化故事的多样性和通用性。或许中国人比其他人更多地应用成语？书的结语之一“勾践故事的讲述是非常重要的。”（第 240 页）对历史学家来说乍看似天真；但它对于提醒人们，要理解社会的进程就必须倾听人们的话语以及表达方式，是至关重要的。