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 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 19th 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 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 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.