
The Early Warrior and the Birth of the *Xia*

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The xia, or the Chinese knight-errant, was born to the warrior class in the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 B.C.) and, therefore, many of its behavioral characteristics bear similarities to those of the warriors in that period. In this article, the early warrior conduct and ideology are to be analyzed to show the formation of the prototype of the xia warrior and the early xia tradition. The earliest antithetic reaction towards the emergence of the xia as a powerful social group, that of Han Fei (280–233 B.C.), is also to be introduced, as well as the military tradition and the legendary sword culture, which were forming a background for the growth of the xia warrior.

Introduction: Terminology and Main Sources of the Research

The Chinese term *xia*, whose early tradition is the focus of this research, has been translated in English literature as “knight”. While many of the early *xia* originated from the Spring and Autumn warriors or knights, not a few, especially in the times of Warring States (475–221 B.C.), Qin (221–207 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), came from a non-noble or non-warrior background. In order to prevent misleading associations the English word “knight” may arouse, I adopt the transliteration of the Chinese word. General use of the word *xia* in this article is in the plural (as in knights). On some occasions, it is used in the singular (as in knight). While it in most cases refers to a personage, it also refers to a mental outlook (as in knighthood). *Youxia*, literally the wandering knight or knight-errant, is a term derived from the *xia*. While the *youxia* has been used frequently to refer to the same group of people as the *xia* in later ages, it was created, or at least in the *Shi Ji*, the greatest records of ancient history where its appearance is the earliest in the extant documentary literature, to refer to a specific group of the *xia*: the commoner *xia*, or *buyi zhi xia* termed by Sima Qian (145?–87? B.C.), the author of the *Shi Ji*.

Sima Qian’s approach to the *xia* was a sympathetic one, deviating from the official line of the time. His creation of the *xia* imagery is somewhat spontaneous and poetical. His attitudes came from the Taoism of the early Han as transmitted by his father Sima Tan, an official historian in the Han court. It resulted from his tolerance of various value systems and his preparedness to find virtues beyond Confucian norms. His poetical attitude came from a mixture of his passionate temperament and tragic personal life. In this regard, his narrative of *xia* heroism and altruism served as a catharsis of his smoldering disappointment and frustration with an age lacking in these virtues.

Sima Qian's *Biographies of the Youxia* and *Biographies of Assassins* are the two most important accounts about the historical *xia* of ancient times. Vivid images of commoner *xia* in the era of heroes are preserved in these accounts. Apart from these two chapters, Sima Qian left description of and comment on the *xia* and *xia* conduct in many other chapters of the *Shi Ji*. It was Sima Qian's sympathetic view that helped the *xia* to reappear as major personages in literature after they had virtually disappeared from the political scene as important players in history.

Sima Qian's perception of the ancient *xia*, which is the main Chinese source of my discussion below, may serve well as important background knowledge in understanding the *xia* and its tradition in its formative stage.

In English publications, Burton Watson published his translation of *Biographies of the Youxia* in his *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Translated from the Shi Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). Around the terminology used in this translation, such as "knight" and "wandering knight" for *xia* and *youxia*, some discussions were conducted (Ho, 1963: 127–35, 171–82). Chu T'ung-tsu in his *Han Social Structure* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1972) devoted a section, "Yu-hsia" in Chapter Five to discuss extensively the *youxia* in the Qin-Han period. He called the *youxia* "redressers-of-wrong". He noticed that Sima Qian in his *Biographies of the Youxia* presented "the ideal type" of the *youxia*. He indicated the *youxia* as a whole had a set of values not compatible with the general moral code of society, especially their illegitimate use of force (Chu, 1972: 185–95).

In the early 1960s, James Liu also began his research on the *xia* and their culture. In 1967, he published his research *The Chinese Knight-errant*, the first, and so far the lone, English treatise on the *xia*. Liu admitted that he was inspired to apply to China the Western quest of "the spirit of protest and nonconformity". He regarded the *xia* phenomenon as an "important illustration" of this spirit in history. His conclusion was that being a *xia* was "more a matter of temperament than of social origin"—"a way of behavior rather than a profession" (Liu, 1967: 3). The main focus of the work is upon the *xia* reflections in literature. His last chapter, comparing Chinese *xia* and European knights in both history and literature, is original and eye-opening. Liu's work, however, is more an interesting introduction to the topic than a full exploration of it. As a literary critic, the author was preoccupied with the literary image of the *xia* in his approach to the subject. He ended up joining the modern trend of idealizing the *xia*.

The Warrior and Codes of Warrior Conduct

Warfare and sacrificial ceremonies are usually considered to be the two most important affairs of the Western Zhou (11th century–771 B.C.) aristocracy. The two were closely connected to each other. Western Zhou ceremony contained an important military component, while warfare was ritualized in each of its stages, from the declaration of war to its conclusion. It seems likely that military ritual in the Zhou was inherited from the previous Shang (16th century–11th century B.C.), or even from the earlier primitive communal system. But it was in the Zhou (11th century–221 B.C.), and especially during the Spring and Autumn period, that the ritualization of military conduct reached its highest level. The Zhou ritualization of

warfare has its own unique features, displayed mainly in two respects: the organization of armies by the kinship system and the ritual conduct of warfare itself.

In regard to military structure, Zhou armies were organized on the basis of the Zhou kinship system. As the head of the aristocracy, the Zhou king had sole authority over directing the armies and often served as chief-commander of the armies. The Zhou military, at both central and vassal state levels, was formed primarily of aristocrats, who served as standing members, and *guoren*, including *shi*, freeman farmers, artisans and merchants, who served as soldiers in wartime. The military hierarchy of nobles and *guoren* was determined according to their position within the kinship system. Many military titles, especially those higher ranks like *shi* and *hang*, seem to have been hereditary among noble families, like the Guo clan in the early Zhou which produced three *shi* commanders in four generations (Wang, 1989: 274). Quite a few nobles eventually replaced their family names with their army title, like *Shi* and *Zhonghang*, probably because the offices were inherited by their clans. Through the kinship system the king of Zhou was firmly able to control his armies, just as he controlled the royal house as head of the clan. With the central armies in his hands, the Zhou king could effectively maintain his suzerainty over his vassals, through whom he controlled the whole country.

Military rituals became systematized during the Western Zhou period. They were closely related to rituals of the kinship system and, to some extent, may be viewed as the extension of that system. In the military these rituals were embodied mostly in practices relating to deity/ancestor worship. They were present in almost every stage of conducting warfare. First, before sending or leading his army to war, the Zhou king would conduct the *gaomiao* ritual, that is, praying in the Ancestral Temple. This ceremony usually consisted of two separate acts. The first was to consult the deity and the king's ancestors through divination, which was practiced by various techniques, such as milfoil, tortoise shell and astrology, and to learn whether war should be declared and what might be the result. When a favorable response was interpreted, the king and his advisers would then discuss the military deployment. The second act of the ceremony was to utter prayers for blessings from the deity and ancestors. During the preparation period, various rituals were conducted in the temple. A declaration of war was made to the soldiers and people. That ritual was called "receiving the divine will at the ancestral temple". Another ritual called "providing weapons [to soldiers] at the Grand Palace" ensued. After this, other rituals such as *leiji*, *yiji*, *jiaoji* and *maji*, involving deities of different kinds, were successively performed until the troops reached the battlefield. If the royal army won its battle, it would perform all the rituals over again on its way back in triumph to the Ancestral Temple. A grand ceremony would then be held in the temple. It consisted of rituals ranging from reporting the victory and presenting captives to the ancestral temple to celebrating the victory and rewarding the warriors for their military exploits (Ruan, 1980; Ma, 1987).

Along with the Zhou expansion of its borders through military colonization of the east, some scholars believe that around the mid-Western Zhou a professional warrior class began to take shape, composed mainly of aristocrats and *shi*. Because of the insufficiency of documentary evidence in this regard, historians are not clear about the exact nature and ideology of the warrior class in its formative period. However, later available documentary evidence and archaeological finds suggest that these professional warriors bore a strong aristocratic imprint and that military affairs were highly ritualized. Many historians believe

that schooling and military training were basically accountable for these features.

Military training became compulsory for young nobles and untitled descendants of the nobility, called *jiuzong xiaozi* in the inscriptions. Young members from the *guoren* class were also enlisted for training. They learned and practiced archery and charioteering in school to become competent warriors and officers. More importantly, they learned rituals and etiquette related to the military, which were supposedly designed and formulated by the reputed architect of Zhou culture, the Duke of Zhou, in order to become both “civilized and disciplined” warriors and officers. For instance, *sheli*, or the shooting ritual, a form of archery, was highly valued and generally practiced among the Zhou warriors. It was used to cultivate the warriors’ sense of morality and the spirit of the gentleman. The *Zhou Li* stated its objective as “making students cultivate morality and learn principles” (Ruan, 1980: 212). Confucius once described the *sheli* ritual as the “competition among gentlemen” (Ruan, 1980: 2466). His description further confirms the ritual function of this type of archery contest.

Although the purpose of the *sheli* ritual was to cultivate the spirit of the gentleman, performance of the ritual required tremendous physical capability. The chapter “*Pin Yi*” in the *Li Ji* has the following passage introducing the *pinshe*, a *sheli* ritual performed at the gathering of interstate lords: “The *pinshe* ritual is one of the most important rituals. Its performance starts in the early morning and is completed near to noon. Those who are not vigorous enough are not able to achieve this” (Ruan, 1980: 1693). The *pinshe*, like all the other *sheli* rituals, was of a sporting and performing nature, but it also belonged to military ritual and in the end it served a military purpose.

The process of military ritualization, in the view of Chinese scholars, began after the expeditions of the Duke of Zhou and King Cheng brought the whole country under Zhou control. They may, however, have begun later in the Western Zhou, with the completion of military colonization. By this time the Zhou aristocracy was fully developed and could afford to pay more attention to the education of its offspring. From then military etiquette began to be valued and proper demeanor in competition became crucial to a gentlemanly warrior. For a warrior, observation of military decorum became as important, if not more than, the acquisition of military skills.

It was from this code of military decorum that the code of warrior conduct was gradually formulated. Herrlee Creel in *The Origins of Statecraft in China* appropriately calls this code “chivalry”, because of its relation with “cavalier”, a warrior who rode in a horse-drawn chariot to fight (Creel, 1970: 257). According to inscriptions and documentary literature, the Western Zhou armies, like those of their Shang predecessor, were composed of both mounted warriors and foot soldiers, with the stress on the former. Chariots were the major component of the Zhou armies. This situation remained unchanged during the Spring and Autumn period and through most of the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.). During this long era, the size of an army was measured by the number of its chariots. The ordinary Zhou chariot carried three warriors, usually nobles: a charioteer in the middle, a spearman on the right, and an archer on the left. It was followed by seventy-two foot soldiers (Ruan, 1980: 616; Sun, 1987: 580).

The code of “chivalry” was probably still in its formative stage in the Western Zhou. First, during the first half of the Western Zhou, the Zhou aristocracy was totally occupied by the difficult tasks of military colonization in the east and border warfare in the north. Only

during the later years of the Western Zhou did the regime have the luxury to devote close attention to protocol and ritual. Second, since almost all the campaigns and expeditions launched by the Zhou armies were against the Yi people, who lived in the east, and border nomadic peoples, in other words non-Zhou peoples, the code of “chivalry” developed among the Zhou warriors was not applicable.

The situation changed during the Spring and Autumn period. As the influence of the Zhou royal house declined, the nobility in each major vassal state became more powerful and independent. The nature of military conflict during this period also changed. Although campaigns against aggressive nomads continued in border states like Qin and Jin, wars primarily broke out among the vassal states, formerly brother subjects of the Zhou house. These vassal states were originally organized under the Zhou kinship system. The nobility in each state continued to practice the same Zhou rites and they shared a common ethical code in their conduct of warfare. This code of chivalrous conduct in battle took further shape in the early Spring and Autumn period. In theory, at least, the opposing sides in battle were trained, or shaped by social pressure, to observe the same code of conduct.

Many accounts of warfare in the *Zuo Zhuan*, the most authoritative work of the Spring and Autumn history, suggest that a true warrior of the time would treat war “as a game played by gentlemen in which, while winning was important, it was even more important to abide by rules” (Creel, 1970: 580). For instance, the following incident occurred when the army of Jin was in flight from the army of Chu: “A chariot belonging to Jin sank in a rut, and could not proceed. A warrior of Chu told the occupant to remove the frame for weapons. After this it advanced a little, and then the horses wanted to turn. The same warrior advised his enemy to take out the large flagstaff and lay it crosswise. When this was done the carriage was able to get out of the hole. Its occupant turned around and said to the enemy who had assisted him, ‘We have not had so much experience as the men of your great state in the art of fleeing!’” (Yang, 1982: 741; Legge, 1960: 258; Creel, 1937: 152). This anecdote, like many others in the *Zuo Zhuan*, demonstrates the strong spirit of gamesmanship which prevailed among gentleman warriors.

The code of chivalry was probably the most important of these rules. Herrlee Creel based his summary in *The Origins of Statecraft in China* on seven accounts in the *Zuo Zhuan*, which cover almost the whole period of the Spring and Autumn from the eighth to the fifth century B.C.:

The Chinese code of chivalry, as variously interpreted, called for refraining from injuring a ruler, even though he were an opponent in battle; not attacking a state in mourning for the death of its ruler; and not taking advantage of internal disorders within a state to attack it. Before battle was joined, messengers should pass between the two armies, and a stipulated time and place be arranged. (Creel, 1970: 259)

These were formal rules for the conduct of warfare. According to the *Zuo Zhuan* and other pre-Qin works, these rules seem to have been recognized in theory and generally observed in practice by the aristocrats and warriors of the time. A proud warrior would abide by the code even at the cost of his own life, as one anecdote in the *Zuo Zhuan* shows. In 521 B.C., the exiled Prince Cheng of Song led a Jin army to attack his enemies, the Hua clan, in their home territory. Driving his chariot into battle, the prince found himself confronting the warrior Hua Bao. Hua shot an arrow at the prince that narrowly missed and quickly had

another ready to shoot before the prince could loose a single arrow. The prince then shouted, “It is base conduct not to let me have my turn to shoot!” Hua held his shot and took his arrow out of the bow. The prince shot his arrow and killed Hua (Yang, 1982: 1428–29).

Sometimes the code was carried to extremes. The famous “Battle at Hong between Song and Chu” in 638 B.C., as rendered in Creel’s translation, illustrates this well:

The Duke of Song was to fight with the army of Chu at Hong. The men of Song were all drawn up in battle array before the forces of Chu had finished crossing the river, and the Minister of War said to the Duke [of Song], “They are many and we are few. I request permission to attack them before they have all crossed over.” The Duke replied, “It may not be done.” After they had crossed over, but not yet formed their ranks, the Minister again asked leave to attack, but the Duke replied, “Not yet.” The attack was not begun until the enemy was fully deployed. The army of Song was disastrously defeated. The Duke himself was injured in the thigh, and his guards of the palace gates were all killed. The *guoren* [of Song] all blamed the Duke, but he said, “The gentleman does not inflict a second wound, or take the gray-haired prisoner. When the ancients fought, they did not attack an enemy when he was in a defile. Though I am but the unworthy remnant of a fallen dynasty, I would not sound my drums to attack an enemy who had not completed the formation of his ranks.” (Yang, 1982: 396–97; Creel, 1970: 258)

The ambitious Duke of Song had dreamed of succeeding the deceased Duke Huan of Qi as chief lord of the Central Plains. He flaunted the banner of propriety and righteousness. He followed the rigid code of warfare partly to take the moral high ground for himself, and partly out of overconfidence in victory. While such a degree of commitment to the code was likely rare even in the Spring and Autumn, there is no doubt that the warriors of the time had their code of chivalry. This code, I believe, was to profoundly shape the later code of the Chinese knight-errant.

Character and Moral Principles of the Spring and Autumn Warrior

Besides the external rules of warfare, the code of the warrior has another integral part, which I call “internalized norms”. Liang Qichao, a modern historian, in his preface to the *Zhongguo Zhi Wushidao*, or *The Chinese Way of the Warrior*, discussed the values he believed central to the code of conduct, especially as practiced by pre-Qin warriors. The eighteen characteristics of the Spring and Autumn warrior listed by him may be summarized as: devotion to the public interest, personal integrity, a strong sense of responsibility and justice, fidelity and loyalty (Liang, 1971: 19–20). Liang wrote in conclusion that: “The welfare of one’s state, friendship, public duty, promise, debts of gratitude and obligations of revenge, personal reputation and moral principle all outweigh one’s life.” Liang claimed that these qualities comprised the highest and purest ideal of the warrior, and that this way of the warrior was commonly observed among warriors of the time (Liang, 1971: 20).

Liang’s image of pre-Qin warriors is poetical and overstated. He was living at a time when social reformers sought to educate a populace which they thought indifferent to its plight. Therefore, some of the concepts he advanced were not applicable to the pre-Qin era, such as the notion of “nation state”. However, Liang’s characterization of *wushidao*, or the Chinese way of the warrior, contains much truth. He championed an old tradition long dismissed by the autocratic political system and the dominant Confucian ideology. But in order to realize his immediate purposes, he colored and even distorted the original warrior image.

Liang's *wushidao* includes not only professional warriors, but also people ranging from plebeians to scholars, officials, ministers, princes and kings. Liang explained that his inclusion of people other than warriors was because "the *wushidao* at the time [of the Spring and Autumn] was becoming a widespread social phenomenon, whose inspiration was limited not just to the warrior community" (Liang, 1971: 8).

The principal values of the warrior code in the Spring and Autumn are revealed in the following extracts, drawn mostly from the *Zuo Zhuan*:

Sense and devotion to duty

Shen Ming (fl. late 6th century B.C.) of Chu enjoyed fame as a dutiful son of his state. The King of Chu appointed him to an office but Shen refused. Shen's father asked him the reason for his refusal. Shen said that he wanted to fulfill his duty as a son. His father urged him to accept the appointment. Shen then left home and became a deputy army commander. When Baigong rebelled against the King of Chu, both the chief minister and army commander were killed. Shen led the Chu army to encounter Baigong's rebel forces. Baigong kidnapped Shen's father and sent a messenger to tell Shen to come over to his side, otherwise his father would be killed. Shen answered in tears, "I started as my father's son, but I am now an officer of my lord. I am unable to fulfill my role as a dutiful son. But should I not be a loyal officer?" Shen then ordered his troops to attack the rebels. The rebel leader Baigong was killed, and so was Shen's father. The King of Chu held a ceremony to reward Shen. Shen said, "I am an officer and receive a salary from my lord; if I absent myself from his difficulties, I would not be a loyal officer. In order to enforce the law of my lord, I have killed my father. I am not a dutiful son any more. I am grieved that I have failed to be a loyal officer and dutiful son at the same time. A life such as this is not worth living." Shen then cut his throat and died (Han, 1980: 363). Shen Ming had been reluctant to become an army officer, which, he thought, would prevent him from fulfilling his duty as a son. Once he became an officer, he regarded his duty to the king as greater than anything else, even the life of his father. He was caught in a conflict of duties. As a warrior, he could not live having failed one of his duties. Death was his only alternative.

Another famous story in the *Zuo Zhuan* shows how far a warrior would go in fulfilling his duty. Zilu (542–480 B.C.), Confucius' warrior disciple, was the steward of Kong Kui, chief minister of the state of Wei. Kuai Kui, the exiled former crown prince of Wei, allied himself with his sister Kong Ji, who was also Kong Kui's mother, and tried to seize power from the lord of Wei. They kidnapped Kong in his residence and forced him to join them. Zilu heard of the incident as he was traveling outside the capital city. He rushed back to Kong's rescue. At the city gate, he met Zigao, another of Confucius' disciples and a *dafu* of Wei, who was fleeing from the coup. Zigao told him not to risk his life by going to the aid of Kong, since he had not been present when the coup occurred. Zilu replied, "Since I take his salary, I should not try to escape from his difficulties!" He then went to Kong's residence and tried to rescue him. During the fighting with two of Kuai's guards, Zilu was struck and the strings of his cap were cut. The dying Zilu said: "A gentleman would not let his cap fall to the ground when he dies." With this Zilu tied the strings and died (Yang, 1982: 1694–96; Legge, 1960: 843). A modern audience may wonder why Zilu should have chosen death. He might have served his lord better by other measures. He must have known that he was doomed to die by rushing to

his lord's rescue alone. But Zilu was more concerned with his principles and his deportment as a gentleman warrior. His death could thus be seen as a final effort to stand for principle and duty. His uncompromising rigidity of attitude towards principle and decorum is indicated in the detailed description of his tying the cap strings before his death.

Sense of honor

A Spring and Autumn warrior regarded his personal integrity as sacred. He would not tolerate the slightest violation of it, even at the cost of taking his own life, as in the case of Lang Shen. Lang was a Jin warrior living in the late fifth century B.C. In the battle of Xiao, the Duke Xiang of Jin was accompanied by Lai Ju on the right in the chariot as his spearman. The duke had one of the prisoners bound and ordered Lai to execute him. The prisoner shouted at Lai, who was startled and dropped his spear. Lang picked up the spear and executed the prisoner. The duke was impressed by his bravery and appointed him the spearman in his chariot to replace Lai Ju. Then, in the battle of Ji, the Jin chief commander Xian Zhen demoted Lang and appointed Xu Jianbo in his place. Lang felt humiliated and angry. His friend asked him, "Ought you not die for this?" Lang said, "I have not found a place to die." His friend then promised to kill Xian Zhen on his behalf. Lang said, "It is said in the *Zhou Zhi* 'The brave one who kills his superior shall have no place in the hall of the Ancestral Temple.' He who dies doing something unrighteous is not brave. He who dies in the public service is brave. Out of bravery I sought the place of spearman. It is proper to be degraded if I am regarded as not being brave. If I complain that my superior does not know me [and retaliate for the degradation], I could only prove that he was right to degrade me. Please wait and see." When the battle of Pengya took place, Lang perished in the charge of his soldiers at the army of Qin. The army of Jin then joined the battle and emerged victorious over Qin. The author of the *Zuo Zhuan* praised Lang as a gentleman for sublimating his anger in service to the army instead of directing it against his superior (Yang, 1982: 519–21; Legge, 1960: 233).

More than a few wars in the Spring and Autumn era were caused by violations of warrior honor, such as the famous battle of An between Qi and Jin. The prominent warrior of Jin, general Xi Ke, was sent to Qi as an envoy to arrange a meeting between the lords of the two states. Duke Qing of Qi allowed his mother and her attendants to hide behind a curtain to view the reception. When the crippled Jin general ascended the steps, the women were heard laughing. The humiliated Xi Ke was indignant and swore when he left the Qi palace, "If I do not revenge this insult, may I never cross the He River again!" (Yang, 1982: 771–72; Legge, 1960: 333). Two years later, Xi Ke became the chief minister of Jin. He led the Jin army to defeat Qi. One of the two conditions he set for allowing Qi to make peace was that the mother of Duke Qing of Qi should be taken as hostage (Yang, 1982: 797).

Only a few were powerful enough, like Xi Ke, to be able to avenge an insult. For most warriors, death was the price of defending their integrity, as in the case of Zang Jian. Zang, a warrior of Lu living in sixth century B.C., was wounded in battle and captured by the Qi army. In order to humiliate Zang, Duke Ling of Qi sent his eunuch to tell him that he would not be killed. To be granted a pardon by a eunuch was a serious insult to a proud warrior. Zang said: "My thanks for the order to pardon me. Perhaps your lord thinks the pardon alone is insufficient and has sent a castrated servant to convey the courtesy to an officer!" On this he drove a stake into his wound and died (Yang, 1982: 1031). This intolerance of insult, which

was later expressed in the words “a warrior can be killed but cannot be humiliated”, was the most important part of the warrior’s integrity.

Truthfulness

The Spring and Autumn warrior would stand by his word at any cost. Duke Xian of Jin (r. 676–651 B.C.) summoned Xun Xi to his deathbed and entrusted to him his young son Xi Qi, whom the duke had favored over his elder sons to become crown prince. The duke knew that his elder sons and their followers would raise an insurrection on his death. He wanted Xun, a resourceful and widely respected minister, to protect the young heir. Xun vowed, “I will put forth all my strength and resources on his behalf, doing so with loyalty and devotion. If I succeed, it will be your blessing; if I do not succeed, my death should follow my endeavors.” Soon after the duke died, Li Ke, a powerful Jin general, informed Xun of his plan to kill the heir and suggested that Xun would not be able to prevent this. The general tried to persuade Xun not to die with the heir. Xun said, “I promised our departed lord [to die if I failed to protect his heir], and I must not say another thing now. Do you think I will be able to make good my word if I am afraid of death? Although my efforts may be of no use, how can I avoid death?” He died to fulfill his promise. The historian of the *Zuo Zhuan* quoted a verse from the *Shi Jing*, the anthology of poetry of the time, to praise Xun’s faithfulness to his word (Yang, 1982: 328–30; Legge, 1960: 154).

An ideal warrior would even honor his unspoken promise, as did Prince Jizha of Wu, regarded as one of the earliest noble knights-errant:

At the beginning of his mission as an envoy, Jizha paid a visit to Lord Xu in the north. Lord Xu liked Jizha’s sword but dared not say it. Jizha knew this in his heart, but he could not offer it to Lord Xu because he needed it for his diplomatic mission. When he came back from his mission, Lord Xu had already died. So he untied his sword and hung it on a tree in the lord’s graveyard. His attendant asked: “Lord Xu has already died, there is no one to leave it to.” Jizha said: “I cannot agree with you. I gave my promise at the very beginning to give the sword to him: how could I betray my promise because he has died!” (Ma, 1987: 1489)

Jizha’s commitment to his promise has been regarded as typical knightly conduct since then. Jizha’s chivalric character was later viewed by Sima Qian as one of the earliest expressions of the *xia* spirit.

Sense of righteousness

Since the Spring and Autumn warrior had a strong sense of principle, he would never engage in any action he thought unrighteous or wrong. If such an order came from his superior, his sense of duty collided directly with his sense of righteousness, as in the case of Fenyang. Fenyang was the marshal of Chengfu, a border region of Chu where the Crown Prince of Chu, Jian, had been exiled by his father King Ping of Chu (r. 528–516 B.C.). The king believed a slanderous rumor that the exiled prince was planning a revolt against him. He ordered Fenyang to kill his son. Fenyang sent a messenger to warn the prince to escape before his arrival. The prince fled to Song, his mother’s native state. The angry king called Fenyang back to the capital. Fenyang ordered himself tied up and escorted to the capital. When asked by the king whether he had revealed his order to the prince, Fenyang admitted to it and explained, “You formerly commanded me to serve the prince as I would serve you. I could not allow

myself to deviate from this in any way. That is why I failed to execute your second order and sent the prince away. When this was done, I regretted it, but that was too late to be any of avail.” The king asked, “How did you dare come here?” Fenyang said, “I was sent on a commission which I failed to execute; if I had refused to come when called here, I should have been twice a traitor. There is no way I could flee.” The king forgave him (Yang, 1982: 1407–08; Legge, 1960: 680–81).

But in more cases, a conscientious warrior found that the only solution to a conflict between duty and conscience was to kill himself. Chu Mei was such a warrior. He was sent by Duke Ling of Jin (r. 620–607 B.C.) to assassinate the chief minister Zhao Dun, who had made repeated remonstrance with the duke and had greatly annoyed him. Chu went to Zhao’s residence very early in the morning but found the bed chamber already open and the minister in his robes ready to go to court. Chu stepped back and said to himself with a sigh, “A man who does not forget to be reverent and respectful in his duties deserves to be called a leader of people. To inflict injury upon such a man would be disloyalty to the people. But to disobey the duke’s command would be bad faith. If I must be guilty of either of these faults, it would be better to die!” He dashed his head against a cassia tree and died (Yang, 1982: 658; Watson, 1989: 77–78).

The *Xia* Prototype in the Spring and Autumn Period

Since the pre-Qin *xia* originated in the pre-Qin warrior class, warrior ideals, such as preservation of personal integrity, repayment of obligation and requital through vengeance were well entrenched in the *xia* code.

The *shi* class, consisting mainly of warriors and junior administrators, was an intermediate level of society under the hereditary system of the Western Zhou, which was still partially functional in the early Spring and Autumn. This system had been steadily weakened by the drastic changes occurring in all walks of life during the period. Many aristocrats lost social status and even their lives in the fierce power struggles, and their descendants lost many of the privileges originally accruing to the nobility. But this does not mean that the nobility as a privileged class became extinct. On the contrary, as the common overlord, the Zhou house, lost its suzerainty over the vassal states, the vassal lords across the country began to acquire political independence and territorial sovereignty. As a result of this movement towards greater independence, the noble class in the vassal states was actually greatly expanded. At the same time, the independent vassal lords sought to retain more warriors, strategists and other experts to defend the sovereignty of their states and to stay in power in a world in which the hereditary system could no longer effectively protect them from external challenges of rival lords and internal threats from their own ministers.

The recruitment, or retaining, of *shi* began to become a serious matter for the vassal lords, princes and other rulers in the Spring and Autumn period. The state of Qi was an example of this. Duke Huan of Qi (r. 685–643 B.C.), supposedly on the advice of his chief minister Guan Zhong (ca 720–654 B.C.), once retained eighty *shi*, “providing them with carriages, clothes and plenty of money and gifts, and sending them in all directions to recruit men of ability across the country” (Zuoqiu, 1980: 239). His son, Prince Shangren, was described in the *Zuo Zhuan* as a person who “retained many men of ability, and thus exhausted

all his family wealth and had to borrow from the state financial office to continue his commitment” (Yang, 1982: 602–03). He finally took over the dukedom from his nephew and ruled the state with the help of his warriors.

Duke Zhuang of Qi (r. 553–548 B.C.) was especially well known for retaining able men. Ruan Ying, a Jin noble, was well-known for retaining *shi*. When Ruan was driven out of Jin by his chief minister Fan Yang, who regarded Ruan’s influence over the *shi* as a threat to him, many of Ruan’s *shi* retainers fled to Qi. Duke Zhuang of Qi readily gave them refuge. Proudly pointing to two of the Jin retainers, Zhi Chao and Guo Zui, he exclaimed, “they are my heroic warriors” (Yang, 1982: 1063).

The duke’s warriors lived up to their obligation of loyalty. When Duke Zhuang was killed by his minister Cui Zhu in 548 B.C., eight of his warriors fought to their death for him. Another by the name of Zhu Tuofu heard of the duke’s death when returning from a ceremony and took his own life immediately, without even changing his ceremonial robe. Another of the duke’s warrior, Shen Kuai, told his aide that he was going to die for the duke and asked him to take care of his wife. The aide refused, wishing to die with him. In their record of the incident, the duke’s court scribe and his two brothers met death for condemning the killer. Shen Xianyu, a confidant of the duke, fled to Lu and hired people there to observe mourning for the duke. Three years after the incident (546 B.C.), two of Duke Zhuang’s loyal retainers, Lupu Kui and Wang He, came back to Qi. They took part in the destruction of the Cui clan and they avenged the duke by exposing the corpse of Cui Zhu in the marketplace (Yang, 1982: 1063, 1097–99, 1138 and 1145–51).

One of the best known heroic warriors of the Spring and Autumn was Cao Mo, a contemporary of Duke Huan of Qi. He was a general of Duke Zhuang of Lu (r. 693–662 B.C.), who thought highly of him because of his courage and strength. General Cao led the resistance to the invasion of Lu by its powerful neighbor Qi. After General Cao suffered three defeats in battle, Lu was forced to give up a further part of its territory to make peace. When the lords of the two states met to swear their covenant on an altar mound, Cao ascended it with a dagger in hand. He seized Duke Huan of Qi and forced him to promise the return of Lu’s captured territory. Upon hearing the duke’s promise, Cao dropped his dagger and descended the mound, remaining completely composed while everyone else was still stunned by what had happened (Ma, 1987: 2535). Cao risked his life to do this out of his sense of justice, since Qi was a large and aggressive power that had trodden upon the sovereignty of its weak neighbor. I believe that he did this also out of gratitude to his lord, who so appreciated his ability that he allowed him to continue to lead the army despite its defeats.

This personal loyalty characterizes the new relationship between warrior and patron. The warrior was free to choose his patron. If he found one who was appreciative of his abilities, he was obligated to serve to the point even of giving up his life. The patron’s understanding and commitment were crucial to this relationship. As mentioned earlier, when the Jin strongman Fan Yang expelled his political rival Ruan Ying, the latter’s retainers all fled to Qi. Zhou Chao and Xing Kuai were among those fleeing. Fan’s adviser Le Wangfu asked Fan to call them back, because they were *yongshi*, or brave warriors. Fan said: “They were Ruan’s brave warriors, what can they be to me?” Le then said: “If you conducted yourself as Ruan did, they would all be your brave warriors!” (Yang, 1982: 1063). Fan apparently did not take Le’s advice. However, Duke Zhuang of Qi offered them his patronage, and was the first lord

in the Spring and Autumn period to confer titles of nobility on such “brave warriors” (Yang, 1982: 1063). Zhou Chao was probably given the title of “noble knight” by the duke, and he later willingly died for him.

This new relationship between lords and warriors appears to have been widely accepted by the late Spring and Autumn period. A lord would reap what he had sown. A warrior’s loyalty and commitment corresponded to how well he was treated and appreciated. Yu Rang, a celebrated warrior in the late fifth century declared: “A warrior will die for one who is appreciative of him” (Ma, 1987: 2538). This became the most important feature in the moral code of the warriors from whom the Warring States knights-errant originated.

Yu Rang was a Jin native, whose early career is obscure. He served Fan and Zhonghang successively, then left them and finally joined Zhibo’s (d. 455 B.C.) camp, where he was greatly honored and appreciated. Zhibo headed the most powerful clan in the state of Jin, the Xun, and controlled the state for many years. Eventually the three other large noble clans formed an alliance to overthrow and kill him. Zhibo’s skull was made into a drinking vessel by his arch-enemy Zhao Xiangzi. Yu Rang fled first to a mountain where he plotted revenge:

Yu Rang said: “Alas! A knight would die for the one who is appreciative of him, as a woman dresses for the one who pleases her. Since Zhibo appreciated me, I must die to avenge him and to repay his appreciation of me. [By doing so] my soul will never suffer shame.” Then he changed his name, disguised himself as a convict-laborer, and entered [Xiangzi’s] residence to plaster the outhouse. He stuffed a dagger inside his clothes, intending to stab Xiangzi with it. When Xiangzi entered the outhouse, he became uneasy; when [his attendants] seized and interrogated the convict-laborer who was plastering the outhouse, it was Yu Rang, holding a dagger inside his garment. [Yu told them:] “I intended to avenge Zhibo on his foe!” The attendants prepared to execute him. Xiangzi said: “This fellow is a man of principle. I will just be careful to keep him away from me. Moreover, when Zhibo perished, he had no posterity, yet his vassal still seeks to repay his foe. This is one of worthiest men in the world!” In the end he released Yu Rang and sent him away.

After a short time had passed, Yu Rang lacquered his body to produce skin ulcers, and swallowed charcoal to make his voice hoarse; having rendered his appearance unrecognizable, he went begging in the marketplace. His wife did not recognize him. On the road he saw his friend. His friend recognized him: “Are you not Yu Rang?” “I am.” His friend wept for him: “With your talent, you could have laid down your pledge and served Xiangzi as a vassal; Xiangzi would have been sure to trust and favor you. Once he trusted and favored you, you could have done as you wished. Would that not have been easy? Then why have you crippled your body and afflicted your frame? To seek vengeance on Xiangzi through means such as this—is this not difficult?” Yu Rang replied, “After making one’s pledge and serving a man as his vassal, if you then try to kill him, that is serving one lord while owing fealty to another. What I have done is most difficult, but the reason I have done it is to shame those of later generations, wherever they might be, who serve men as vassals yet owe fealty to another.”

A short while after Yu Rang left [his friend], Xiangzi was about to leave his residence. Yu Rang hid under a bridge he expected Xiangzi would cross. When Xiangzi reached the bridge, his carriage horses flinched. “This must be Yu Rang!” he said and sent a man to question him. It was indeed Yu Rang. Xiangzi then berated Yu Rang: “Did you not once serve the clans of Fan and Zhonghang? Zhibo destroyed them both, yet you did not avenge them, but instead offered your pledge to serve Zhibo. Now Zhibo too is dead; why are you so determined to avenge only his death?” Yu Rang said, “I served the clans of Fan and Zhonghang, and the clans of Fan and Zhonghang treated me as an ordinary man; therefore I repaid them as I would an ordinary man. As for Zhibo, he treated me as one of the *guoshi*, the greatest knights of his state, and so I will repay him as I would one of the greatest knights of the state.” Xiangzi sighed deeply and wept: “Alas, Yu Rang! Your actions on behalf of Xiangzi have already made your name, and when I pardoned you before, that was enough. Consider how you wish to die, I will not release you again!” He had his troops surround Yu Rang. Yu Rang said, “I have heard that

an enlightened ruler does not obstruct virtuous deeds and a loyal vassal has a duty to die for his good name. You generously pardoned me in the past, and the world praised you as a worthy lord. For today's affair, I naturally accept punishment, but I hope that I might ask for your garment and strike it, to show that it was my intention to seek revenge. [If you grant this request,] then even though I die I will have no regrets. I hardly dare hope for this, I only desire to lay out my innermost desire." Xiangzi thought Yu Rang a truly principled man. He had a man take his garment and give it to Yu Rang. Yu Rang drew his sword, leaped in the air three times, and struck the garment, "Now I can go down and report to Zhibo!" Then he fell on his sword and died. The day he died, when the resolute knights of the state of Zhao heard of it, they all wept for him. (Ma, 1987: 2538–40; Nienhauser, 1994: 321–23)

The story of Yu Rang demonstrates a code of behavior that the *xia* were to identify as the essence of their activity. Yu Rang may thus be regarded as the prototype of the *xia* in the Spring and Autumn period.

The relationship between a lord and a *xia* warrior, therefore, was primarily of a personal nature. In other words, the warrior served and fought for an individual lord rather than a royal house or state. He was at liberty to choose a lord who would win his loyalty through appreciation of his ability. Yu Rang left the first two lords who had retained him but when he encountered Zhibo, who regarded his ability highly, Yu Rang devoted himself totally to his lord. The reciprocal basis of the relationship could have equally negative consequences. Mencius, the most prominent Confucian scholar in the Warring States period, later expressed this well: "If a ruler looks upon his subjects as dogs and horses, his subjects will look upon him as a stranger; if a ruler looks upon his subjects as dirt and weeds, his subjects will look upon him as an enemy" (Ruan, 1980: 2726). The ruler's enlightenment was crucial to the relationship.

In this kind of relationship, loyalty was more likely to be based on personal reasons than moral and ethical convictions. As long as the warrior was appreciated, he could be expected to give his devotion, even his life, to the person who appreciated him. The patron's moral virtues and ethical stance were not at issue. Zhibo, when he was in power, launched many unjustified battles against his rivals, neighbors and even his own lord. He drove out Duke Chu of Jin (r. 474–458 B.C.) and replaced him with the puppet Duke Ai (r. 458–441 B.C.). His final attack on Zhao Xiangzi was motivated, in my view, by his greed for land and wealth. Yu Rang, must have been fully aware of the unrighteous conduct of his lord, but that did not change his allegiance to him.

Another example is Duke Zhuang of Qi, whose appreciation of brave warriors was mentioned earlier. He committed adultery with the wife of his minister Cui Zhu, and further insulted Cui by giving the latter's personal belongings as gifts to his own bodyguards. Cui's resentment resulted in his killing the duke, an evil lord by the standard of the day. The notoriety of the duke was, on at least one occasion, raised to dissuade one of his loyal warriors from going to die for him. The chapter *Li Jie*, or *Cultivation of Moral Integrity*, in the *Shuo Yuan*, a Han collection of pre-Qin historical anecdotes, contains the following anecdote:

When Cui Zhu of Qi killed Duke Zhuang, Xing Kuaigui was on his way back from his mission to Jin. His attendant told him, "Cui Zhu has killed Duke Zhuang. Where will you go?" Xing said, "Go ahead! I will go to die to requite my lord." The attendant said, "Every one of our neighboring states has heard of the notoriety of our lord. Is it worth a person [of moral integrity] like you to die [for him]?" Xing said, "It is good of you to tell me this, but it is too late, though. If you had told me this earlier, I could have remonstrated with our lord; if he did not listen to me, I could have left him. However, neither did I remonstrate with him, nor did I leave him. I have heard that one who takes wages dies for his

master. I have taken wages from an evil lord, so how can I find a virtuous lord to die for?" He then drove his carriage into the palace and met his death. His attendant said, "Although he had an evil lord, he died for him. As I had a virtuous master, how can I not die for him?" He killed himself in the carriage. (Xiang, 1987: 90)

Xing's death would appear to have been based on pure personal obligation rather than on moral principle, in that he served a lord who was not a virtuous man.

It is of interest to look at the other representative reaction towards the above event. When the duke was killed, his chief minister Yan Ying (589?–500 B.C.) was asked whether he intended to die with the duke or flee into exile. Yan said: "If a ruler dies for the sake of his state, then one should die with him; if he flees for the sake of his state, one should flee with him. But if he dies for personal reasons, or flees for personal reasons, then unless one is among his intimates or particular favorites, why would one presume to share his fate?" (Yang, 1982: 1096–98; Watson, 1989: 146). Yan was voicing an old principle which underlay the aristocratic politics of the former Western Zhou and which was still followed by many Spring and Autumn ministers and professional warriors. But for warriors like Yu Rang and Xing Kuaigui, who put personal gratitude and allegiance ahead of any other considerations, Yan Ying's ethical code was no longer applicable. That is why Yu Rang died for Zhibo, and why so many of Duke Zhuang's warriors died for him as well. Most of these warriors did not share the vices exhibited by their lords. They probably did not endorse their lord's immoral behavior. They died for him for reasons of the personal bond. In other words, they died to requite their lord's appreciation of them. This later became a defining component of the *xia* code.

Han Fei on the *Xia*

The prototype of the *xia* is to be found in the Spring and Autumn period when the old feudal order was in the course of disintegration. However, the names *xia* or *youxia* were not used until the Warring States period.

The use of *xia* as a term referring to a particular social group first appears in the works of Han Fei (280–233 B.C.), the most influential Legalist thinker of the pre-Qin era. In his caustic essay *Wu Du*, or *The Five Vermin*, Han Fei emphatically condemned the *xia*, along with Confucians, itinerant scholars and others, as vermin which undermined the authority of the ruler and crippled the stability of society. "Confucians use their writings to confuse the law, while the *xia* resort to force to violate the prohibitions" (Chen, 1974: 1057). Since the *xia* were frequently criticized by Han Fei in his works, they had clearly drawn attention by his time.

Han Fei may not, in fact, have been the first to use the word *xia*. However, Han Fei is probably the earliest scholar to single out this active and important social group. Since it is Han Fei's description that is to be found in the extant historical documents, and since Han's view of the *xia* was long propagated as the official view, his interpretation of the *xia* may serve as the starting point of our discussion.

As a Legalist, Han Fei built his political system on two fundamental pillars: agriculture and war on the one hand, and respect for authority and fear of the law on the other. Any deviation from these became the target of his attack. Besides Confucians and the *xia*, the so-

called five vermin included itinerant philosophers, idle courtiers, merchants and craftsmen. Han Fei's assessment is clear and straightforward. If a person was neither a farmer nor a soldier, he belonged to the category of vermin. Since Confucians, philosophers, merchants and the *xia* all evaded farming and military service, they were parasites and thus harmful to society. They deserved to be exterminated like vermin. But the unfortunate reality was that these people gained the rulers' favor and were extremely active in political life. Han Fei complained that the successes of such people had lured others away from their proper duties. Not surprisingly, the *xia* became the specific focus of his attack.

Han Fei charged that Confucians and the *xia* shared a common characteristic, which he called wandering. They wandered away from farmland and battlefield. They wandered around amongst powerful ministers, princes and lords to promote their personal interests and spread their harmful influence. So he mockingly described the Confucians, along with the itinerant scholars, as *youxue*, or wandering scholars, and the *xia* as *youxia*, or wandering knights (Chen, 1974: 1058). Han Fei was the first scholar to use these terms.

Han Fei first defined the *xia* by occupation: "The *xia* are retained for their personal swordsmanship" (Chen, 1974: 1057). He claimed that "these swordsmen assemble followers, and flaunt their personal integrity in order to gain a name for themselves and to violate the laws set by government" (Chen, 1974: 1078). Lawlessness seems to have been the main crime of the *xia*. But to Han Fei's dismay, this challenge to the authorities was widely accepted and even praised in his time because of the boldness of the offenders. In the *Five Vermin*, he addressed the confusion caused by this ambiguous attitude:

Because someone breaks the law, he is condemned, yet his being bold and fearless is counted for more. The administration of praise and blame or reward and punishment becomes an absurdity. The law deteriorates and the people become disorderly. If there is transgression against one's brother, standing up for him is now considered honorable; if one's friend is offended, to avenge him is considered loyal. But when honor and loyalty prevail rather than the lord's law, the people will always be carrying on vendettas and the officials will never be able to control them. There are those who do not work for a living and yet eat and are clothed and we call them able; there are those who do not fight yet are given honors and we call them worthy; if this kind of ability and worthiness prevails, the army will be weakened and the lands will be deserted. If the lord is pleased by the acts of the so-called able and worthy and forgets the disaster of a weakening army and deserted lands, then private action will dominate and public benefit will crumble. (Chen, 1974: 1057)

Han Fei's definition of *xia* went beyond *daijianzhe*, or "people who carry the sword", to include people from non-military occupations. In his essay *Ba Shuo*, or the *Eight Criticisms*, Han Fei defined those who "abandon their public duties in order to pursue private friendship", "neglect their public duties" and "indulge in personal desires" as the *xia* (Chen, 1974: 972). These people were mostly officials and nobles who retained *sijian zhi shi*, or "private swordsmen", in the capacity of *simen zhi shu*, "forces of private houses", to spread their influence. Later they were called *qingxiang zhi xia*, or "the *xia* of nobles and ministers". These noble *xia* became the most important *xia* group in the Warring States period.

To sum up, Han Fei saw the *xia* as those who went their own way apart from the laws set by the authorities to govern society. Han Fei's description of the Warring States *xia* is in outline accurate but it is biased by his Legalist perspective. He had no interest in exploring the *xia* in terms of their personal morality and integrity, as Sima Qian and even Ban Gu, the two greatest historians in the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), would later do. His concern

was law and order, and the authorities, especially the royal house, which enforced and maintained law and order. For Han Fei, the rise of the *xia* as a group constituted a direct threat to royal authority and state interest. He warned the rulers against encouraging and promoting the *xia*, but his arguments failed to arouse attention in a time when martial capability was especially valued. Strong measures against the *xia* were not initiated until the middle of the Western Han dynasty, when the centralized government could no longer tolerate challenges to its power.

The Sword, Swordsmanship and Sword Culture

Many scholars have searched for the original meaning of the word “*xia*” and their findings have no doubt enriched our understanding of the people who were socio-politically called *xia*. In this regard, the Japanese sinologist, Ichisada Miyazaki, in his article *On Xia*, has advanced an interesting speculation on the relation between *xia* (knight) and *jia* (sword) from an etymological point of view: “If we admit the fact that the sword was already called *jia* [at the time], the word *xia* or *youxia* must have some relation with the word *jia*, namely that a *xia* was a person who carried a sword” (Miyazaki, 1988: 252). This is insightful because it explains why the *xia* were, in Han Fei’s words, also called *daijianzhe*, or people who carry swords, and *sijian*, or private swords. It also shows the close relation between the *xia* and the pre-Qin warriors, as well as the main characteristic of the *xia*: the use of force.

The sword and the *xia* form an inseparable image. In the early stage of *xia* history, the sword as a weapon of war indicated the origins, character and ideals of this social class. Later, with the development of the *xia* literature, the sword became a cultural and aesthetic symbol which the *xia* carried in their legendary search for social justice. It is almost impossible to talk about the *xia* without talking about the sword.

In Chinese mythology, Chi You, the Yellow Emperor’s powerful challenger, was credited with being the inventor of weapons. His image in the Han Shandong brick inscription is of a monster wearing every kind of weapon. This depiction belongs to later ages. The invention of weapons probably occurred during the stage of animal hunting. The first weapons were made primarily of wood, stone, horn and bone.

In the Shang dynasty, weapons made of bronze were brought into use and quickly became dominant in warfare. Bronze weapons were widely used even after China entered the Iron Age in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The battle of Muye was the decisive engagement between the Zhou and Shang. From the speech in which King Wu of Zhou harangued his troops before launching the final attack, we can see the weapons which the Zhou army used: “Lift up your lances, join your shields, raise your spears, I have a speech to make!” (Ruan, 1980: 183). Our knowledge of Zhou weaponry is greatly enhanced by modern excavations of large quantities of bronze lances, spears and shields from the Shang, the so-called Ruins of Yin. While the lance and spear were the main weapons of combat in the field, swords were used primarily as a weapon of self-defense. After King Wu led his troops into the capital of Yin [Shang], he struck the corpse of King Zhou of Yin with his “light sword”. When he went to establish himself on the Yin King’s throne, he was escorted by his generals Sanyi Sheng, Taidian, Hongyao and others, who all carried swords as they guarded him (Ma, 1987: 26–27).

The “sword” was defined in one of the earliest Chinese lexicons, *Shi Ming*, in this way: “*Jian*, or the sword, is *jian*, or defense. It is what one uses to defend oneself when facing unexpected incidents” (Liu, 1939: 113). Because of its use in the Shang and Western Zhou as a weapon of personal defense, the sword had to be of a length convenient for carrying. One of the earliest bronze swords excavated from a Western Zhou tomb at Zhangjia Po near Xi’an is 27 cm in length. Other swords believed to be from the same period are all shorter than that, like the one from Baicao Po No. 2 tomb which is 24.3 cm (Yang, 1980: 124–25). They are more like modern daggers in size (Ruan, 1980: 916).

With the development of metallurgy and the growing use of infantry, the sword gradually became the favorite light weapon both for combat and personal defense. This change became evident during the Spring and Autumn period. First, manufacturing technology had been greatly improved. The bronze sword was now longer, sharper and harder. Second, carrying the sword was now becoming a fashion for men. Xun Zi in his essay *On Weaponry* showed the procedure of selecting warriors. He mentioned that an ordinary contestant would be required to “wear a helmet and carry a sword”. This was seen as the basic military equipment of a warrior.

During the middle and late Spring and Autumn period, the sword was more commonly used in the central and southern regions of China. Geographic conditions might be one of the reasons for this. In the north, i.e., the Central Plain, warfare was conducted mainly between chariots with long hand-held weapons. In the south, the presence of river networks and jungle terrain placed severe limitations on chariot-fighting. Infantry thus developed quickly as the states in the south rose to rival the northern states in the mid-Spring and Autumn period. Short light weapons like swords were more effective for infantry. The technology of sword manufacture and the arts of swordsmanship also underwent major development. The episode in which the Lord of Xu coveted the sword carried by Prince Jizha of Wu, mentioned earlier in this article, shows the high quality of sword-making in the south.

Whether the sword enjoyed wide usage among ordinary soldiers in the south is still a topic open to further research. But I believe that the sword became one of the favorite side-arms for the nobility. On many occasions they found the sword indispensable, as in the case of Prince Jizha’s diplomatic mission. When Lord Xiangcheng of Chu was enfeoffed, “he was wearing a bright green robe, carrying a jade-handled sword and walking in silk shoes” (Xiang, 1987: 277). Decorating swords became a typical way for aristocrats to display their luxurious lifestyle. When the poet politician Qu Yuan (339?–278? B.C.) was driven out of the court of Chu to wander about in exile, he described himself as carrying “a long sword” and “a high hat” (Yuan, 1984: 147). The long sword was a symbol of his lofty aspiration, while the high hat suggested his uncompromising integrity.

The culture of swords, including their myths and legends, was also developed in the south. The sword could sometimes be seen as an incarnation of evil. It was recorded that whenever Yunchang, the king of Yue, obtained a new sword, he would call in his sword appraiser Xue Zhu. Once Xue asked his lord not to carry the sword called “Yuchang”, since he found its texture was in a reverse direction, suggesting *nili*, or “violation of reason”, an omen of misfortune. The king then gave it as a gift to Prince Guang of Wu, who used it later to kill his lord, King Liao of Wu (r. 526–515 B.C.) (Xue, 1992: 84). Geng Yu, the Lord of Lu (r. 527–519 B.C.), was a collector of swords. Whenever his craftsmen made a new sword, he

would test its cutting edge on human beings. This brought great misery to his people. His sharp swords failed to reverse his fate of being killed by a sharper weapon: rebellion of the people (Yang, 1982: 1444).

Documents show that carrying a sword in the early Spring and Autumn period was still governed by the Zhou rites. It is mentioned in the *Kaogong Ji*, a documentary book of the time, that different sizes of swords were carried by people of different ranks (Ruan, 1980: 961). Common people were probably not allowed to carry swords. With the decline of the Zhou rites and the drastic social changes of the Spring and Autumn period, the sword became an item of dress for men of various social classes. Swords were no longer limited to high society; men from lower social ranks also carried them, though their swords were sparsely or simply decorated. Feng Xuan, one of the best known *xia* of the Warring States, arrived in straw sandals when he heard Prince Mengchang was eager to acquire capable retainers. He was placed in the junior retainer house. Ten days later the prince asked the superintendent of the house what the newcomer had been doing. The superintendent said: “Feng is very poor and only owns a sword with its hilt wrapped in straw. He taps his sword and sings, ‘Long blade, let us go home, for there is no fish for food’ ” (Ma, 1987: 2381; Nienhauser, 1994: 197). Poor as Feng was, it seems that he still kept a sword to show his difference from other commoners. His sword embodied his virtue and his worth, and stood as a symbol of his identity.

In the south, where most swords were manufactured, the role of the sword became ritualized and even mysticized. He Lu (r. 514–496 B.C., originally Prince Guang, later King of Wu) was an admirer of swords and the owner of a collection. His name is inscribed on a number of swords excavated in modern times. In the *Wu Yue Chunqiu*, a story is recorded about a sword, which he ordered from Gan Jiang, the greatest swordsmith of the late sixth century. Gan Jiang and his wife Mo Xie “extracted the metal ore from the five mountains”, waited until “the sun and the moon met each other” to begin the smelting, and then “employed three hundred young boys and girls to work the bellows and load the coal”. Mo Xie thereupon cut her nails and hair and threw them into the furnace to meld with the bronze (Xue, 1992: 74). The smelting operation was ritualized in this description. In the same account, we are told of the old belief that “magical ore could be melted only with human sacrifice” (Xue, 1992: 74). The story relates that Gan Jiang’s teacher and his wife sacrificed themselves in order to smelt ore for swords.

In another account, Gan Jiang and Mo Xie, along with their friend Ouye Zi, were invited by another great sword maker Fenghu Zi to work for the King of Chu. They made three swords: Longyuan, Tai-e and Gongbu. It is said that the sword named Tai-e later showed its miraculous power in battle. The *Yue Jue Shu* has the following story: The allied forces of Jin and Zheng had surrounded a Chu city for three years. After King Zhao of Chu (r. 515–489 B.C.) obtained the Tai-e sword, he ascended the gate tower and waved the sword to launch a counter-attack. The morale of his troops was roused and the siege of the city was finally raised. The surprised king then asked Fenghu Zi: “A sword is merely something made of metal: why should it have a spirit like this?” Fenghu Zi explained that the sword was activated by what was called the “spirit of the metal weapon”: when it encountered the “spirit of a great king”, the sword could produce a miraculous power (Yuan, 1962: 3).

A more bizarre and interesting story in the *Wu Yue Chunqiu* suggests that a sword even

possessed the ability to make moral judgments. He Lu, the King of Wu, owned a sword called *Zhanlu*, which he carried at his side. One day it suddenly flew from him to King Zhao of Chu. King Zhao of Chu called Fenghu Zi in again for explanation. Fenghu Zi told the king: “Since the sword is made of metal extract and the essence of the sun, it is endowed with intelligence. It adds to the majesty of the one who carries it, and can be used to resist enemies. However, if the lord who owns it engages in an unethical plot, the sword will disappear” (Xue, 1992: 84). Swords were the only ancient weapon upon which such mysterious powers were bestowed.

Writers of the pre-Qin era were fond of using the sword to convey their political and moral ideas. They were also attracted to swordsmanship itself, which was understandable in view of the high level of development the art had reached. Lie Zi has left a vivid description of swordsmanship:

There was a person called Lanzi, who sought favor from Lord Yuan of Song for his skills. Lord Yuan called him in and asked him to show his skills. Lanzi took two stilts, which were twice as long as his height. He tied them to his legs and walked and ran on them. He also played with his seven short swords. He juggled them, keeping five swords in the air at one time. Lord Yuan was amazed by his performance and granted him gold and silk right away. (Zhang, 1986: 94)

The scene is reminiscent of an acrobatic show. *Lanzi* was a general term for itinerant entertainers in pre-Qin and Han times. From the story we can perceive the effectiveness of swordsmanship in impressing a lord.

The most famous pre-Qin story of the art of the sword is preserved in the Han work *Wu Yue Chunqiu*. The protagonist of the story, Yuenu, a swordswoman from the countryside of Yue, was summoned by the King of Yue to train his soldiers:

On her way north to see the king, Yuenu met an old man, who called himself Yuan Gong. Yuan asked Yuenu: “I have heard that you excel in swordsmanship. Can you show me this?” Yuenu answered: “I do not presume to anything, test me as you wish.” Yuan then pulled up a bamboo cane. It looked withered and its upper culm was broken. Yuenu took the broken culm, while Yuan took the lower culm. Yuan began to thrust at Yuenu, who warded off three blows. When Yuenu fought back, Yuan jumped up to a tree, where he turned into a white ape. (Xue, 1992: 347)

Apart from the fact that a woman could attain such skill in swordsmanship, this account is significant in two respects. First, this exhibition of swordsmanship was not displayed through the use of actual weapons, but through a substitute, in this case a piece of withered bamboo. This rendering became archetypal in later *xia* literature. Second, the Yuan of Yuan Gong is phonetically identical to *yuan*, an ape, or sometimes a monkey. The ancient Chinese believed that the ape (or monkey) was a nimble animal in movement. In the story, the swiftness of the old man served as a foil to show the skill of Yuenu. The display of supremacy by the protagonist through triumphing over unusually skilled opponents also became a topos in *xia* literature. After her dramatic encounter with the old man, Yuenu was honored as a guest of the King of Yue:

The King of Yue asked: “What is swordsmanship?” Yuenu answered: “I was born in a deep forest and grew up in an uninhabited wilderness. There is nothing I have not practiced or understood. Lords of the great world are all fond of swordsmanship and they praise it endlessly. What I have mastered was not learned from people, but learned through my own sudden enlightenment.” The King of Yue asked: “Then what is its way?” Yuenu said: “Its way is very subtle and simple, its meaning is very profound

and deep. Every path has its own boundaries and also has its *yin* and *yang*. Adjusting the boundaries causes the movement of *yin* and *yang*. The way of swordsmanship is to keep one's full vigor inside and to show calm outside. In appearance the swordsman looks like a quiet girl, but when he moves he looks like a terrifying tiger. He positions himself carefully and controls his breathing; he moves in accord with his mind. He disappears like the far away sun, and he returns like a leaping rabbit. In a flash he pursues the form and chases the shadow. Nothing can restrain him from moving wherever he wishes. He sweeps effortlessly over the ground without any hindrance. With this swordsmanship, one man can withstand a hundred, and one hundred can withstand ten thousand! (Xue, 1992: 347–48)

By the time the *Wu Yue Chunqiu* was composed at the end of Eastern Han dynasty, the skill described in the above story had been idealized. However, the culture of swords and swordsmanship displayed in the story is essentially identical with those earlier stories in this section. This culture of swords and swordsmanship has thus been embellished and enriched constantly by writers like the author of the above description. It became an essential part of *xia* literature.

The transformation of the sword from weapon to cultural symbol was now largely complete. In the post-Han period, mystery and symbolism surrounding the sword were intensified.

Conclusion

The early *xia* tradition exhibited a virtually complete transformation in the course of the millennium from its birth in the Spring and Autumn era to its completion in the Wei-Jin era (c. 8th century B.C.–c. 6th century A.D.).

The pre-Qin *xia* emerged from a well-documented Neolithic and Bronze Age martial tradition. In their early history they were carriers of certain moral values and chivalric ethics of the pre-Qin warrior class. This martial tradition, also preserved in myth and legend, was passed down through the tribal warrior, the farmer-soldier *guoren*, and the military *shi* to the more complex Spring and Autumn warrior. In other words, though the tradition of the *xia* is far more ancient, the origins of the *xia* themselves lie in the *guoren*, *shi* and Spring and Autumn warriors.

It was the Spring and Autumn warrior that thus became the prototype of *xia*, and the later *xia* adopted a large part of the ethical and behavioral code of this warrior class. Bravery, altruism, faithfulness and comradeship were common traits of both groups, but the *xia* differed from the Spring and Autumn warrior in two principal respects: First, the *xia* were essentially displaced warriors in a very different society, and second, the *xia* hired out their military services primarily to private interests instead of serving more legitimate sources of authority.

The tendency of the *xia* to defy authority and act with personal capacities first became evident during the period of the Warring States, but their altruistic and self-sacrificing spirit made them different from the bandits and other types of outlaws with whom they coexisted. The *xia* became an active force in the political arena, often acting as mercenaries but sometimes taking independent action. They soon became the subject of extensive attention, and usually drew severe criticism from scholars and social thinkers, especially from those who advocated the authority of law and ruler, such as the practitioners of the Legalist School. Han Fei thus became the earliest pre-Qin scholar to describe the character and behavior of the

xia. From his Legalist viewpoint, Han Fei christened the *xia* “private swords”, and denounced their violation of the laws and their affronts to public order. His criticism of the lawlessness of *xia* behavior remained almost unchanged as an “official” attitude over the succeeding dynastic period of more than two millennia.

Finally, the close relation between the *xia* and a sword is manifested by their etymological bonds. The *xia* were, in Han Fei’s words, the people who carry a sword or “the private swords”. The image of sword carrying shows not only the close connection of the *xia* with the pre-Qin warrior class, but also the chief characteristic of the *xia*: the use of force. Since its birth in the pre-Qin era, the *xia* has been described as using the sword either to break the social order, or to enforce justice in the world.

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Glossary

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|---------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Ba Shuo—八说 | Lang Shen—狼曠 | Xi Qi—奚齐 |
| Baicao Po—白草坡 | leiji—类祭 | xia—侠 |
| Baigong—白公 | Li Jie—立节 | Xian Zhen—先轸 |
| Cao Mo—曹沫 | Li Ke—里克 | Xing Kuai—邢蒯 |
| Chengfu—城父 | Liang Hong—梁弘 | Xing Kuaigui—邢蒯贵 |
| Chi You—蚩尤 | Liang Qichao—梁启超 | Xu Jianbo—续简伯 |
| Chu—楚 | Lie Zi—列子 | Xue Zhu—薛烛 |
| Chu Mei—锄麋 | Longyuan—龙渊 | Xun Xi—荀息 |
| Chunqiu—春秋 | Lu—鲁 | Yan Ying—晏婴 |
| Cui Zhu—崔杼 | Luan Ying—栾盈 | Yi—夷 |
| dafu—大夫 | Lupu Kui—卢蒲葵 | yiji—宜祭 |
| Daijianzhe—带剑者 | maji—马祭 | Yongshi—勇士 |
| Fan Yang—范鞅 | Mo Xie—莫邪 | Youxia—游侠 |
| Fenghu Zi—风胡子 | nili—逆理 | Youxue—游学 |
| Feng Xuan—冯谖 | Ouye Zi—欧冶子 | Xu Jianbo—续简伯 |
| Gan Jiang—干将 | pinshe—聘射 | Yuchang—鱼肠 |
| gaomiao—告庙 | Pinyi—聘义 | Yu Rang—豫让 |
| Gongbu—工布 | Qin—秦 | Yue—越 |
| Guan Zhong—管仲 | qingxiang zhi xia—卿相之侠 | Yuenu—越女 |
| guo—虢 | Qu Yuan—屈原 | Yunchang—允常 |
| Guo Zui—郭最 | Sanyi Sheng—散宜生 | Zang Jian—臧坚 |
| guoren—国人 | Shang—商 | Zhangguo—战国 |
| Guoshi—国士 | Shen Kuai—申蒯 | Zhanlu—湛卢 |
| Han Fei—韩非 | Shen Xianyu—申鲜虞 | Zhangjia Po—张家坡 |
| hang—行 | Shen Ming—申鸣 | Zhao Dun—赵盾 |
| He Lu—阖闾 | shi—师 | Zhao Xiangzi—赵襄子 |
| Hongyao—閼天 | shi—士 | Zhibo—智伯 |
| Hua—华 | Shi Ming—释名 | Zhi Chao—殖绰 |
| Hua Bao—华豹 | sijian zhi shi—私剑之士 | Zhonghang—中行 |
| jiaoji—郊祭 | simen zhi shu—私门之属 | Zhou—周 |
| Jin—晋 | Song—宋 | Zhuo Chao—州绰 |
| jiuzong xiaozi—旧宗小子 | Tai-e—太阿 | Zhouli—周礼 |
| Kaogong Ji—考工记 | Tiandian—太颠 | Zhou Zhi—周志 |
| Kong Ji—孔姬 | Wang He—王何 | Zhu Tuofu—祝佗父 |
| Kong Kui—孔悝 | Wei—卫 | Zuo Zhuan—左传 |
| Kuai Hui—蒯聩 | Wu Du—五蠹 | Zigao—子羔 |
| Lai Ju—莱驹 | Wu Yue Chunqiu—吴越春秋 | Zilu—子路 |
| Lanzi—兰子 | Xi Ke—郟克 | |