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The Chinese *Xia* versus the European Knight: Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives¹

Gongfu practitioners who upheld justice and protected the weak from the strong in pre-modern China were known as *xias*. *Xias* had been recorded in canonical history long before they became idolised as figures of superhuman prowess in fantasy literature and movies. Focusing on *gongfu* literature and historical records prior to the twentieth century, this essay examines the character traits and heroic deeds associated with the *xia* in the context of the aspirations and moral values espoused by the common people in pre-modern China. The essay, in other words, is not intended to be an exercise in literary or filmic analysis. Rather, it is a cultural study of *xias* and the traditional Chinese values they embody and represent.² By returning to the Chinese classics to study *xias* in their original linguistic and cultural settings, I hope to correct certain widespread misunderstandings of *xias* and pre-modern Chinese culture.

Some of these misunderstandings are no doubt caused by the rather common mistranslation of *xia* as “knight.”³ At first sight, the two seem to abide by similar codes of behaviour such as loyalty, honour, and generosity. Yet these “similar” ethics carry different meanings in feudal China and Europe. Contrasting the Chinese *xia* to the

European knight⁴ will allow me to clarify how “similar” ethoi in feudalistic Chinese and European martial cultures were inflected differently by their respective social, political, philosophical, and economic contexts. This will in turn enable me to examine why knights acted in a primarily conservative way, supporting the kings and lords, while *xias* were often rebels against political and social establishments. It will also allow me to explain why knighthood excluded the poor and women, while *xiahood* discriminated purely on the basis of moral character, not class or gender. These contrasts will help readers understand why chivalric romance was a genre that supported and justified the aristocracy, while the *wuxia* narrative⁵ was a genre of social protest.

The Chinese *Xia* versus the Chivalric Knight

The central character of a chivalric romance is the knight, that of *gongfu* narrative, the *xia*. There are certain superficial resemblances between the *xia* and the knight. Both were skilled fighters in feudal societies. Ideally, both fought for justice. Both were supposed to care for the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. For both, courage was a supreme virtue. Both upheld generosity as an ideal. Although both the knight and the *xia* flourished in pre-modern societies, the dates of the “premodern” in China and in Europe did not coincide exactly, partly because the former remained feudal for a much longer span of time. Richard Barber noted that knighthood was connected to “the emergence of cavalry in the eighth and ninth centuries.”⁶ According to Maurice Keen, the age of chivalry took place “somewhere between, say, the year 1100 and the beginning of the sixteenth century.”⁷ In China, the earliest *xias* in historical records were those in the Warring States Period (403-221 BC). But the earliest appearance of *xias* could no longer

be traced by the time of the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). As the historian Sima Qian (approximately 145-86 BC) pointed out, “About the plebeian *xias* of antiquity, we have no means of obtaining information.” However, it is evident that *xias* long predated the Warring States, since there are many songs about *xias* in the *Yuefu Shiji*, an anthology of songs in China from its earliest times to 1100 AD.

Among such songs are “Song of the Youxia” and “Making Friends among the Young Bloods.” In the early Qin Dynasty, *xias* were recorded in serious historical texts such as *Zuo Zhuan* and *Book of the Warring States (Zhanguo Ce)*. *Xias* continued to appear in history and only went into decline after China became a republic in 1911. The major differences between the knight and the *xia* go much deeper than their historical dates, however. More significant contrasts can be drawn by exploring the values, actions, and defining character of such figures, as well as their social and political roles in their respective cultures.

a. What is a Knight?

A knight must be male. Ramon Lull claimed that women could not be knights because of their vanity,⁸ and maintained that men were stronger and more intelligent, both physically and emotionally.⁹ Secondly, a knight must be well-off and his family must be well established. The etymology is telling. “Chivalry” is derived from the old French word *chevalier*, and is closely tied to horsemanship.¹⁰ As Léon Gautier points out, “the term *chevalier* (knight) may well derive from *caballarius* (a horseman).”¹¹ The horse, the noble animal, was chosen to carry the knight who could afford not only a horse but also armour, weapons, and a squire. The horse was singled out from other beasts of burden for

the knight, because “it was found that the horse was the most noble and most covenable to serve man.”¹² Bonnie Wheeler defined a knight as “a professional mounted warrior who belonged to the noble class and was dedicated to a code of noble behavior.”¹³

b. What is a Xia?

Unlike the knight, a *xia* could be either a man or a woman. The knight’s associations with wealth and nobility were not applicable to the *xia*. A *xia* had no armour and no squire. S/he did not even necessarily own a weapon; the most competent *xias* often fought barehanded. Unlike “chivalry,” the etymology of *xia* has nothing to do with wealth or social prestige, but with moral qualities. There is no English equivalent for *xia*. As a noun, *xia* is a figure who “protects the weak against the strong, and courageously combats injustice.”¹⁴ As an adjective, *xia* means upright and courageous. The passion for justice and righteousness were no less important attributes for a *xia* than martial prowess. Gender and class origins, on the other hand, have nothing to do with the word *xia* and are totally irrelevant to *xiahood*. The primary importance of moral qualities for *xiahood* can be seen in the image of the *xia* in popular Chinese imagination. This image was well summarised at the 1992 Tamkang University Conference on “*Xias* and the Chinese Culture” by an unnamed scholar cited by Gong Pangcheng:¹⁵ *xias* inspire Chinese culture with their “morals and courage as expressed in their dauntlessness in the face of great danger and selflessness in the service of humanity. S/he robbed the rich and gave to the poor, defended the weak against the overbearing, sacrificed his/her life for the right cause, and executed Justice for Heaven.”¹⁶ In order fully to explain *xia* and *xiahood*, I

will now examine the necessary attributes of a *xia* as well as the kind of personality commonly associated with such a figure.

Martial prowess alone can yield a fighter but not a *xia*. To be a *xia*, a person needs to have a number of moral qualities.

To begin with, a *xia* must have a strong sense of *justice*. The Chinese refers to *xias* as “hating injustice like an enemy” (*ji e ru chou*). *Xias* punished and eliminated bullies on behalf of the common folk and, during times of foreign invasion and occupation, did the same for their country. They robbed the rich and gave to the poor, because the wealthy were often associated with the powerful in ancient China.

Secondly, no one could be a *xia* without being *altruistic*. *Xias* were radically generous, and not only with their material possessions. They were also ready to give up their lives in order to protect the weak against the strong. James Liu describes the altruism of the *xias* as follows:

They habitually helped the poor and the distressed, and often risked their own lives to save others. Their unselfishness extended not only to their friends but even to total strangers, so much so that the word [*xia*]¹⁷... has become associated in usage with the word *yi*, which is usually translated as “righteousness” but, when applied to [*xias*], has quite a different meaning and comes closer to “altruism.” As Feng [Youlan]¹⁸ pointed out, *yi*, in the sense understood by the [*xias*], means doing more than what is required by common standards of morality, or in other words behaving in a “supermoral” way. For instance, “to bestow a kindness and to reject any reward is supermoral.”¹⁹

While I agree with Liu’s description above of the *xias*, I beg to differ from his reading of *yi*, the word often attached to *xia*, as in the expression *xiaiyi*. It is not accurate to say that *yi* acquires a “different meaning” in the context of *xiahood*. It is just that *xias* were willing to take *yi* to a much more *extreme* degree than most people. Also, altruism is not

“different from” righteousness. Righteousness is a central part of the altruism for which the *xias* were well known and admired. *Xias* were characters of *extremity*, in love and hatred, as well as in their commitment to justice, righteousness, and altruism.

Thirdly, *xias* were known for their *courage and fearlessness*. *Xias* inspired people with their dauntlessness in more ways than simply confronting the rich and the powerful. They were fearless even in the face of death. As James Liu puts it, “It required physical and moral courage of the highest order to be a [*xia*]. The question of danger seems never to have entered the minds of [*xias*].”²⁰

Fourthly, *xias* were admired for their *truthfulness in word and in action*. The grand historian²¹ Sima Qian at the court of Emperor Wu during the Han dynasty observed that *xias* “always meant what they said, always accomplished what they set out to do, and always fulfilled their promises.”

Fifthly, *xias* were greatly celebrated for their *loyalty*. They were intensely loyal to the cause of justice, as well as to those they admired or those who appreciated them. Unlike the chivalric knights, *xias* did not owe allegiance to kings and lords, unless the kings and lords were of morally admirable character. As regards oppressive rulers, the *xias* were reputed for fighting tyrants and bullies on behalf of the oppressed. A *xia*'s loyalty, in other words, was based on moral principles and human sentiment rather than on politics or social hierarchy.

James Liu pointed out that “To a [*xia*], personal loyalty was more important than loyalty to one's sovereign or parents. Even when a [*xia*] died for a prince, it was not out of a sense of loyalty such as a subject owed his sovereign, but such as one man owed another who ‘appreciated him’.... This is clearly illustrated by the lives of such men as

Hou Ying and [Jing Ke].”²² While a *xia* was always willing to die for those who appreciated him, Liu erred in thinking that *xias* were committed merely to “personal loyalty”²³ and “private justice,” and that “they thought in terms of individuals, not of society as a whole.”²⁴ A *xia* did not fight primarily for personal friends. True to the principle of righteousness, *xias* often volunteered for death just in order to protect a good person, even if that person was a mere stranger. A good example was the story known as “The Orphan of Zhao.”²⁵ The fact that *xias* always fought for the common people, most of whom the *xias* did not know personally, proves Liu to be inaccurate in associating *xias* with merely “personal” loyalty and “private” justice. Also, *xias* were deeply concerned about their country’s fate. Famous *xias* such as Jing Ke, Gao Jianli, Huang Feihong, and Qiu Jin either risked or gave up their lives for their states or country. In fact, one would not be deemed a *xia* if s/he had no concern for his/her country and people.²⁶ There was a popular saying in pre-modern China: “Everyone has a duty toward the rise and fall of his/her country” (*Guojia xinwang, pifu you ze*). A deep sense of obligation toward the fate of one’s country was part of the traditional Chinese concept of righteousness. Committed to righteousness as the *xias* were, it would be wrong to say that they had in mind only “personal loyalty.”

For similar reasons, it is fallacious to think that *xias* were concerned only with “private justice.” Although they had little regard for the state law, especially when it was used as a tool of the oppressors, they were devoted to justice *per se*. In Western parlance, while *xias* were not afraid to violate positive law when it was unjust, they did so not because they were lawless, but because they believed in a higher form of justice—

something close to what the West calls natural law. For this reason, *xias* were the enemies, rather than friends, of thugs and gangs who bullied the common folks.

The last necessary attribute of a *xia* is *integrity*. Sometimes the word “honour” is used to translate this characteristic of *xias*. Note, however, that the *xia* was committed to honour not in the sense of desiring personal glory and social recognition, but in the sense of being an honourable person, a character of integrity and dignity. The principle of integrity as indispensable to *xiahood* is evident in the traditional Chinese saying that “A *shi* can be killed but not compromised” (*Shi ke sha, bu ke yu*). As the historian Sima Qian put it, *xias* “disciplined their action and cherished their honour, and their fame spread all over the empire.” Even Han Feizi, the legalist known for his condemnation of *xias*, admitted that *xias* “established standards of integrity to distinguish their names.” This was a remarkable testimony to the *xias*’ integrity, since the legalists who believed in the absolute authority of the law were normally sworn enemies of *xias*. Han, of all legalists, was especially known for his accusation that “Confucianists subvert the state with scholarly rhetoric; *xias* violate the law with force” (*Ru yi wen luan fa; xia yi wu fan jin*).²⁷ Even then, he was impressed by the *xias*’ integrity.

In addition to these moral attributes, *xias* were also associated with a certain temperament and personality in pre-modern Chinese history and literature.

First of all, *xias* captured the pre-modern Chinese imagination with their free spirit and open heart.²⁸ They were not tied down by monetary concerns, and were liberal with giving money to the needy, with treating friends and strangers, and with spending in general. They would be perfectly happy leading an impoverished life, and remained

undisturbed regardless of their material circumstances. As James Liu pointed out, “A [*xia*] might receive handsome sums from friends without any embarrassment, as [Guo Xie] did; or refuse an offer of household effects worth several million cash, as [Zhu Zhang] did... [They] either lived lavishly while sharing their luxury with friends, or lived modestly while giving money to the poor.”²⁹

Xias were equally free from the trappings of social conventions. They did not hesitate to openly defy the law should it stand in the way of justice, and they showed similar disregard for social conventions. Sima Qian reported on the friendship of Jing Ke (ob. 227 BC) with a dog butcher and a musician in the State of Yen: “Together they drank in public, singing and weeping in turn, paying little heed to what the public might think.”³⁰ James Liu described the *xias* as rebellious individuals who “objected to any rigid regimentation. They had little respect for the law of the state or the conventions of behaviour of the society in which they lived.”³¹

Above all, a *xia* was absolutely free in that nothing—not even death—could deter or disturb him or her. Traditional Chinese culture had a saying for this absolute freedom: “Pushing life and death beyond consideration” (*zhang shensi zhi zhu du wai*). When even life and death fail to affect a person’s spirit, nothing in the world can have dominion over his/her will. Given such temperament and personality, it is not surprising that *xias* were characters of extremity, passionate in their pursuit of justice and equally intense in their love and hatred.³²

Contrasting the Knight with the *Xia*

a. *Knighthood and Xiahood: Institutional versus Existential Identity*

As we have already observed, the word “chivalry” associates a knight first and foremost with his horse—that is, his nobility and wealth, whereas “*xia*” is defined by certain moral attributes. A knight earned his knighthood through the support of a network of institutions, institutions which granted him his prestigious status with the ceremony of dubbing. *Xiahood*, by contrast, was not bestowed by any institution, be it religious, social, or political. As James Liu points out, “Anyone behaving according to the ideals of *xiahood* became *ipso facto* a [*xia*].”³³ *Xiahood* was, in other words, an *existential* rather than a social or political identity. A person became a *xia* by virtue of his/her character and actions. As noted above, *Xia* as an adjective means upright and courageous. The moment someone deviated from those moral attributes, s/he could no longer be referred to as a *xia*.

This is not the case with a knight. A knight continued to wield his prestigious powers even if he was wicked and brutal. The institutions that conferred his knighthood continued to wrap him in the “charisma of office” even if he strayed from the right path. Charisma of office, as Max Weber pointed out, is “transmitted by ritual means.... In this case the belief in legitimacy is no longer directed to the individual, but to the acquired qualities and to the effectiveness of the ritual acts.”³⁴ The rite of initiation that accompanies the bestowal of an office confers on the person initiated the charisma of that office. Through this act of initiation, even a sinful priest can effectively bestow salvation through the sacraments, because once he is ordained he is infused with the charisma of the office. By the same token, a sinful knight remained a knight once he had been dubbed. By contrast, since a *xia* was defined by moral qualities and *xiahood* was not

bestowed by any social institution, if a *xia* betrayed his/her moral commitments, s/he could not seek refuge in the “charisma of office” and s/he lost his/her *xia*hood. S/he would fall from *xia* into a mere swordsman or -woman. This is not to say that *xias* were infallible in character and action. Rather, given that “*xia*” as an adjective means upright and courageous, the moment someone went against those basic moral attributes, s/he could no longer be addressed as a *xia*.

Further evidence that *xia*hood is an existential identity is that a *xia* did not even have to act unjustly to lose his/her *xia* identity. The moment s/he stopped fighting on behalf of the oppressed against the oppressors, s/he was no longer a *xia*. For this reason, the Shaolin monks were only monks, not *xias*. A Shaolin monk became a *xia* only when he left the temple to fight bullies on behalf of the common people. But once he had righted the wrong, left the human world and returned to the temple, this individual would again become a monk and no longer a *xia*. For this reason, there was no institution of *xias*. Although the Shaolin Temple can be called an “institution,” there is no Shaolin Club of *Xias*. This is the difference between *xias* and other kinds of martial-arts practitioners who did have organisations. The “martial arts world” (including *wulin* and *jianghu*) could be deemed some form of institution, yet it included swordsmen and -women for hire and other fighting types.

The differences between the institutional nature of knighthood and the existential nature of *xia*hood can be further elucidated by contrasting the meanings of “class,”³⁵ allegiance and loyalty, honour, freedom, and generosity in the two different cultures. Bonnie Wheeler defines a knight as “a professional mounted warrior who belonged to the noble class and was dedicated to a code of noble behavior.”³⁶ A knight’s “noble

behavior” went along with his class origin; plain folks were not supposed to be capable of noble behaviour. *Xia*hood, on the other hand, was not monopolised by any class. Anyone who had *gongfu* skills as well as the moral attributes described above became *ipso facto* a *xia*. *Xias* came from all kinds of backgrounds (from plebeians to nobilities); their training process, in particular, effectively erased their social differences. Many *xias* were originally trained in the mountains, oftentimes in Buddhist and Daoist temples, because the cultivation of spiritual and physical disciplines requires non-disturbance by human affairs. Once they were sent away from human society to the mountains, social origins became irrelevant.

On the class backgrounds of *xias*, I beg to differ from Feng Youlan³⁷ and Lao Gan.³⁸ They held that *xias* were desperate, unemployed peasants, artisans, and commoners who became professional warriors. Their mistake consists of confusing *xia* with *shi* and *jianke*. *Shis* and *jiankes* were professional warriors; a *xia* would not “qualify”³⁹ as a *xia* if s/he fought for a living because doing so would subject him/her to the dictate of self-interest and the interest of his/her employer. Moreover, while professional killers could include desperate “commoners,”⁴⁰ *xias* were not “desperate.” They were free spirits who fought for justice.

Tao Xishen and Yang Liensheng came closer to the truth than Feng and Lao. Tao noted that among *xias* were found not only “bankrupt warriors, merchants, and craftsmen, ... unemployed peasants” but also “impoverished members of the old warrior class” and even nobles.⁴¹ Yang went a step further, speculating that among the *xias* were possibly impoverished nobles left over from the old feudal order.⁴² Tao and Yang noticed a

mixture of classes among *xias*, yet they fell short of grasping that such a mixture existed because class was irrelevant to *xia*hood.

James Liu pointed out that knights supported social hierarchy while *xias* fought against it:

the Western knights were the backbone of the feudal system; the Chinese ones represented a disruptive force in feudal society. The former extended courtesy only to their social equals and had a strong sense of class solidarity; the latter made a point of breaking down social barriers and were entirely free from class-consciousness and social snobbery.⁴³

There were reasons why knights tended to support the *status quo* as Liu described it. In order to become a knight, a man needed the sponsorship of a variety of powerful institutions, religious, political, and social. His knighthood needed to be conferred upon him through the dubbing ceremony. Naturally, a knight would support the institutions that propped up his status. A knight was rewarded with honour and fortune through his loyalty to his overlord, his king, the Pope, and God.

The *xia*, by contrast, owed no allegiance to any institution. Generally, s/he despised institutions, especially when they abused their power. A *xia*'s loyalty was given to justice and to those who appreciated him/her. Jing Ke was one of the many *xias* who died for justice. Yu Rang, on the other hand, sacrificed his life out of gratitude to the person who appreciated him. "A *shi* would die for the person who understands him, in the same way a woman would dress up for the person who admires her," such was the sentiment expressed by Yu when he prepared to die for Zhi Bo.⁴⁴

I will now analyse in detail the *xias*' and knights' stance toward different feudalistic institutions, beginning with religious institution. European knights' reliance on the sponsorship of the Church stands in stark contrast to the *xias*' free spirit. Although the

Church initially disapproved of the knights' violent activities, it became more accepting of them when it began to recruit the latter as soldiers for the Christian cause. In time, the Church came to support the warriors and became a central actor in the actual knighting ceremony as well as the blessing of the knight's armour and battle regalia. During the first stage of chivalry, known as "Feudal Chivalry," a knight was expected to be at least a formally reverent Christian. The relationship between the Church and the warriors solidified during the Crusades, which took place in the second stage of chivalry, known as "Religious Chivalry." During this period, the best way for a knight to exercise his prowess was by joining a crusade. Chivalry became "the Christian form of the military profession; the knight [became] the Christian soldier."⁴⁵ The Church's power over chivalry was so strong that "one could not become a knight without being Christian and without being baptized."⁴⁶

With good reason then, the knight owed his supreme loyalty to God and His Church.⁴⁷ Unlike the knight who had religious sanction and hence was bound to the Christian God and the Church, the *xia* owed no allegiance to any particular religious institution. A similar contrast applies to knights and *xias*' relationships to political institutions. According to Sidney Painter, the second of the five virtues of Feudal Chivalry is fealty. A knight's duties were not confined to serving the Lord in Heaven; he was also expected "to maintain and defend [his] worldly lord" who hired him or gave him land.⁴⁸ As Richard Barber pointed out, "at the outset, the knight was a warrior who served a lord by fighting for him."⁴⁹

The *xia* was not hired by a lord and owed no ruler any loyalty. A *xia* might risk his/her life for a prince or an emperor who appreciated him/her, but out of personal gratitude, and not of institutional loyalty or obligations.

The divergence between the knight and the *xia* also manifests itself in the two figures' relationships to social and cultural institutions. Knighthood was associated with elaborate and expensive ceremonies and rituals such as dubbing and tournaments. The institutions in charge of such ceremonies and rituals had strict rules of inclusion and exclusion as to whom they would initiate. In China, no class had proprietary rights to *xia*hood, and there was no institution to exclude anyone with the aspirations from becoming a *xia*. James Liu contrasted the two as follows:

Being a social class, knights naturally confined chivalry to members of their own class and applied strict rules for admission. When Christian moral standards were superimposed on these, they formed the rules of the various orders of knighthood. By contrast, the Chinese [*xias*] never organized themselves into orders and never possessed any monopoly over [*xia*hood]: anyone behaving according to the ideals of Chinese [*xia*hood] became *ipso facto* a [*xia*].⁵⁰

Since the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion was what gave the knight and his class their special privileges and prestige, he would naturally defend the institutions overseeing such inclusions and exclusions. Social rank and hierarchy—the rough equivalent of class system in economic and political modernity—was one such institution. The *xia*, by contrast, did not acquire his/her *xia*hood through a politics of inclusion and exclusion. The *xia* had no institutional partiality and his/her sole criterion was justice as s/he set out to right the wrongs of the world. The irrelevance of institutions to a *xia*'s consideration is evident in his/her rejection of even the most widely accepted institution—the family. A

xia would not hesitate to take to task his/her own family members should they be guilty of injustice.

Honour meant different things for the knight and for the *xia*. For the former, honour meant the fame, recognition, and titles due to nobles. Honour in this sense was the exclusive privilege of nobility and closely tied to the prestige and institutions with which the knight was associated. For the *xia*, honour had nothing to do with personal glory or institutional titles. It simply referred to the integrity and dignity of a person.

For the knight, honour meant being admired and worshipped by others. Combat was a primary means through which a knight sought honour and recognition. In Leo Braudy's analysis, "combat... turns individual honour into a social fact by its display in the presence of others, and it is preeminently in war that men make themselves men in the eyes of other men and in their own."⁵¹ By contrast, the *xia* avoided, and even rejected recognition.⁵² As Sima Qian told us, a *xia* "would not boast about his/her ability or his/her virtues."⁵³ The *xia* refused recognition as a matter of moral principle. The *xia*'s selflessness did not stop at refusing material rewards for risking his/her life; s/he would even reject psychological gratifications such as glory and recognition for performing heroic deeds. S/he preferred not to be thanked for his/her services to humanity. Sima Qian further described this principle and practice of *xias* as follows: "They rushed to the aid of those in distress without giving a thought to their own safety. And when they had saved someone from disaster at the risk of their own lives, they did not boast of their ability and would have been ashamed to brag of their benevolence."⁵⁴ *Xias* withdrew themselves from public attention. They often preferred to remain anonymous, or divulged only a nickname. They did not expect, and even refused, thanks from those

they aided. Upon accomplishing their missions, they often retreated into the mountains, or simply disappeared into anonymity by blending themselves into the common folk, without leaving their names even to those they had rescued. For Sima Qian, this moral stance of the *xias* distinguished them from those who used swordsmanship to pursue wealth and fame.

While honour for a *xia* pertained only to personal integrity and a quiet dignity, honour for a knight involved *spectacle*, the putting up of a *spectacular* show for the public. The tremendous emphasis in the chivalric period on expensive and fashionable armour and weapons was part of the game. For a knight, to be honoured meant to be worshipped by others, meant above all feeling superior to a large group of “inferiors.” Honour for him depended much on an outward show of prestige and superiority. For the *xia*, honour pertained to one’s inner cultivation rather than an outward show. Much of a knight’s honour was derived from social institutions and recognition; this was decidedly not the case with a *xia*.

The difference between the two explains why tournaments were such important events for knights. Tournaments provided occasions for a knight to show off his expensive horse, armour, weapons and, above all, his masculinity and martial prowess. As Leo Braudy pointed out, in the institution of chivalry, honour meant establishing one’s manhood and nobility. A knight constantly felt compelled to prove himself through aggressive fights for honour. Thus a knight was always looking for opportunities to fight, be it a real battle or private wars, the latter being the origin of tournaments.⁵⁵

By contrast, a *xia* had no interest in showing off his/her martial arts skills. If pressed to a match, a *xia* always took pains to avoid injuring his/her opponent (the

principle known as *dian dao ji zhi*.)⁵⁶ In the event that the *xia* was superior in ability, s/he would often try to save the other's face by skillfully covering the other's deficiencies in the match. And if s/he was not entirely successful in this cover-up, s/he would say in public that his/her victory was the result of the other's "deliberate, generous permission" (*Cheng rang*). Instead of monopolising honour for himself/herself, a *xia* sought to preserve the honour of both in a match.

The Chinese belief that an honourable person would never cause another to lose face sets the culture of the *xia* apart from that of the knight. For the latter, honour was the exclusive possession of the winner; it was a rare good to be competed for between him and many of his peers. Since honour was the sole possession of the winner, the other's honour would inevitably mean one's own dishonour. Thus there existed a temptation for a knight to treat his opponents like deadly enemies.

A knight had plenty of possessions to boast about: his title, his power, his castle, and his wealth in general. A *xia* possessed neither glamorous titles nor material goods. Knights were often associated with castles, the knights' personal and political home. They might wander afar on some missions, but their eventual goal was to return home. The fact is, a knight's identity and title were closely tied to his domain and dominion as signified by his castle. Not surprisingly, knights had a strong sense of territory and guarded their castles jealously. A *xia*, on the other hand, was not attached to property or the notion of home. Some *xias* did have families and homes. Nevertheless, they preferred travelling to being tied down to a place. That is why *xias* have been referred to from time to time as the wayfarer-*xias* (*youxia*.)⁵⁷ Basically, with their free spirit and open heart,

xias made the world their home (*sihai wei jia*). They were at home no matter where they were in the world.⁵⁸

Both knights and *xias* were prepared to give up their lives. Knights would do so for justice, but more often they would do so for recognition: “Better to be dead... than to be called a coward,”⁵⁹ a mentality that Hegel analysed elaborately in his master/slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*,⁶⁰ as well as in “Chivalry”—Chapter II, Section III of his *Aesthetics*.⁶¹ *Xias*, on the other hand, valued Justice and Loyalty above life. This is significant. Only when a person put moral values above life could s/he be truly free to pursue justice without any fear. Sima Qian described the *xias*’ fearlessness as follows: “They would keep to their promises even at the cost of their own lives. They rushed to the aid of those in distress; their own life and death did not matter.”⁶²

Both the knight and the *xia* were charged with the mission of fighting injustice. Yet they were entrusted with the same mission for different reasons: the knight was believed to be free to uphold justice because he was wealthy and hence supposedly not driven by basic needs to selfish actions; the *xia* was deemed free to uphold justice because s/he owned nothing and was not tied down by materialistic concerns.

This provides an interesting opportunity for comparative cultural studies. There is a belief in the West that people with more possessions are less driven by materialistic needs, and hence more likely to act with disinterestedness on matters of justice. This was the rationale behind the chivalric belief that only the knight, only the nobility, could maintain justice. In Books V and VI of *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*, Ramon Lull argued that a knight needed to be in plentiful possession of worldly goods. Without temporal goods, Lull contended, the honour of chivalry would not be maintained, and the

knight might be rendered incapable of fighting evil. Poverty caused a man to think base thoughts and engage in falsehoods and treasons. This, by the way, was also the argument used repeatedly in the West by those arguing against extending the franchise to people without property.

Under the influence of Buddhism and Daoism, the traditional Chinese believed in quite the opposite: the more property one accumulates, the more caught up one becomes in the pursuit of worldly goods, and the more self-serving one becomes. Since property is tied to the concept of the self,⁶³ getting rid of possessions helps one to let go of the ego, whose desire for self-aggrandisement is the root of all suffering. One becomes absolutely free if one manages to eliminate altogether the concept of the self down to its very foundation, that is, the attachment to one's life. If "I" don't exist, from whence come the worries about losing my life? If I can let go of all my possessions, including even my life, I will be left with no fear and no worries; nothing can intimidate me, and I will be absolutely free to pursue justice in a thoroughly disinterested manner. These, by the way, were the last words of the revolutionary martyr Tan Sitong (1865-1898) as portrayed by Li Hanxiang in *The Last Tempest (Yingtai qi xue*, Hong Kong, 1976). When confronted by the Empress Dowager's question as to whether he was truly unafraid of losing his life, he replied, "Even the Pure Land does not exist. Even I do not exist. What is there to 'lose'? What is there to be afraid of?" Not surprisingly, Tan was praised for his *xia* spirit. It was through this complete letting go of all possessions that Tan was able to pursue the righteous cause in an absolutely dauntless manner.⁶⁴

As Sidney Painter pointed out, generosity was one of the five virtues of "Feudal Chivalry."⁶⁵ The knight demonstrated his generosity through *largesse*. *Largesse* showed

a knight's magnanimity with material possessions, thereby distinguishing him from the bourgeoisie and the peasants. Again, *largesse* was a mark of class distinction: knights were capable of giving because they had more than enough, unlike the commoners who were busy hoarding for basic survival. The historical reality of many knights' behaviour proved this association of wealth with generosity and a just mind to be inaccurate. Far from being capable of magnanimity and generosity, it seems that many knights of the twelfth century were greedy creatures hungry for earthly goods. Richard Barber quoted a poet at the end of the twelfth century who stated that "knights are the worst because of their pride, the way they covet horses and rich clothing, living wastefully and dissipating their goods, glorying in vile deeds. . . . [I]f they see anything they want, they carry it off, seize it or take it by force."⁶⁶ Instead of being protectors of justice, the knights here look more like the oppressive government officials or local bullies whom the *xias* sought to get rid of on behalf of the suffering common folk. We have already seen how generosity was an essential moral attribute of the *xia*. As James Liu asserts,

it was more common for a [*xia*] to give money away than to receive payment for his [*xia*] activities. Though he might receive cash gifts from friends and followers, these were in the nature of voluntary contributions rather than payment for service rendered. In short, the [*xias*], or at least some of them, did not depend on [fighting] for a living. They cannot, therefore, be considered professionals. Nor were they necessarily professional warriors. Men like [Zhu Jia] were famed not for expert swordsmanship or military genius but for altruism and sense of justice.⁶⁷

The *xia*'s giving and the knight's *largesse* differed widely in their social and political meanings. The *xia*'s giving had nothing to do with distinguishing himself/herself socially and politically. *Largesse* was a ritualistic gesture backed up by religious, social, and political institutions. The *xia*, by contrast, gave in an entirely free spirit. S/he had no God,

no lord, no institution of any kind to please, to glorify, or to reinforce in his/her generous acts. In fact, no institution could force him/her into giving or not giving. S/he did it entirely out of his/her free will.

b. Politics--Relationships to Rulers and the Ruled

As discussed earlier, knights were hired by kings or lords to protect them and their territories. In return, some lords granted land to the knights. The knights owed their lords loyalty; they upheld the laws of the rulers and the *status quo*. By contrast, *xias* were not hired by anyone. Like the Buddhist monks and Daoist priests, *xias* lived on voluntary gifts. They held no employment, because employment rendered one dependent on money and on other people's good will. Employment trapped one in concerns for the worldly; it took away one's spiritual autonomy.⁶⁸

Since the *xia* was not dependent on, and did not owe loyalty to, a ruler, s/he was free to fight injustice, including injustices committed by rulers. In fact, fighting corrupt government officials has been a popular theme throughout the history of *gongfu* narratives. This is why the Chinese legalist philosophers regarded *xias* as a pest to be eliminated. Indeed, *xias* had been persecuted by the government from time to time throughout Chinese history. Sima Qian, for example, recorded that Emperor Jing in the Han dynasty (Han Jingdi) ordered all *xias* arrested and executed.⁶⁹ Later on in the same dynasty, the imperial secretary Gongsun Hong condemned and executed the *xia* Guo Xie and his entire family, even though the official could not produce any evidence of Guo's guilt.

Both the knights and the *xias* were supposed to defend the weak against the strong, the oppressed from the oppressors. This is the ideal image Ramon Lull presented of knighthood in his book on chivalry when he described one of the knight's duties as "maintain[ing] and defend[ing] women, widows and orphans [as they were] neither powerful nor strong."⁷⁰ In reality, however, the knight did not so readily come to the defence of the people, especially if the oppressor turned out to be the knight's overlord, the King, or the Church. Furthermore, it was not uncommon that knights simply gave rein to their own self-interest and became themselves oppressors out of greed and lust. Peter of Blois in the mid-twelfth century complained that knightly misconduct on the battlefield was the norm rather than the exception. The newly knighted at once went off to break their vows, "oppressing the poor subjects of Christ, and miserably and unmercifully afflicting the wretched, in order to sate their illicit lusts and extraordinary desires in the sorrows of others."⁷¹ The preamble to the Rule of the Templars, written about 1130, also presented an unfavourable picture of early members of knighthood: "they despised the love of justice, which belonged to their duties, and did not do as they ought, that is defend poor men, widows, orphans and the Church: but instead they competed to rape, despoil, and murder."⁷² Richard Barber concluded from his various studies that "[t]hroughout the twelfth century, writers attacked knights as violent, greedy, disorderly, luxury-loving and proud."⁷³ Norbert Elias was also inclined to view these medieval warriors more as "oppressor[s] of peasants" than "noble knight[s]," even going so far as to call the gallows "the symbol of the knight's judicial power."⁷⁴

A *xia*'s primary mission was to defend justice, and this often manifested itself as the defence of commoners against oppressors. If a *xia* stopped carrying out such duties,

s/he would automatically lose his/her *xia*hood. There were usually two kinds of villains whom a *xia* fought against on behalf of the people: thugs, gangs, and local bullies on the one hand, and corrupt government officials on the other. In either situation, the *xia* was bound to run into conflict with the government. When the *xia* fought against the first group, s/he was taking the law into his/her own hands.⁷⁵ But even more frequent was the case when a *xia* had to stop state officials from abusing the ruled. On such occasions, a *xia* became an open enemy of the ruler(s).⁷⁶

Another important contrast between the knight and the *xia* is that the knight occupied a superior position to the commoners on the social hierarchy. The *xia*, by contrast, never mentioned his/her social origin. S/he did not set himself/herself above the people s/he fought for. S/he was their “fellow human being” and not their superior; s/he blended in with them and was loved by them. A knight was distinguished by his social institutions as the master above a group of people who were his servants and subordinates. Honour belonged to the knight and the knight alone—he was the noble one served and admired by the ignoble. This phenomenon was given a telling analysis by Norbert Elias in his study of a sequence of drawings known as *Medieval House-Book* (1475-1480; artist unknown):

[I]t is an integral part of [the knight’s] self-esteem to have these other people moving about him who are not like him, whose master he is. This feeling is expressed again and again in the drawings. There is scarcely one of them in which *courtois* occupations and gestures are not contrasted to the vulgar ones of the lower classes. Whether he rides, hunts, loves or dances, whatever the lord does is noble and *courtois*, whatever the servants and peasants do coarse and uncouth.⁷⁷

As much as a winner needs losers in order to gain his honour, a master needs slaves in order to be recognised as a master. The code of chivalry set the knight apart from the

common men. His vow raised him up above the common soldier, marking him as one of the privileged “insiders” bestowed with a special honour and noble mission. He bonded more readily with knights from other countries—his fellow initiated elites—than with commoners from his own land. It was not unusual for a knight to *kill* peasants but *capture* nobles. Peasants’ lives were deemed cheaper. In short, despite the chivalric ideal that knights should protect the poor, in reality, the relationship between the two classes seemed to consist of more enmity than amity. By contrast, far from dominating or oppressing the commoners, a *xia* became a *xia* by serving them and eliminating for them their oppressors. The *xia* had no interest in becoming the master or the leader of the oppressed.

Of course, there were good knights who fought from time to time for the poor and the wretched. But such a knight would never become one *with*—much less one *of*—the commoners. This, in fact, was one reason why romance was circulated only among social elites, apart from the obvious factor that European education at that time was restricted to the monks and the aristocrats. In contrast to the chivalric hero, a *xia* was the hero of common people, because s/he treated them as fellow human beings, and was in turn regarded as one *of* them. S/he was also one *with* them, because s/he executed for them their wish to punish their oppressors. They were the people’s symbol of justice and righteousness—they inspired them and were loved by them. Even Ban Gu (32-92 AD), who condemned *xias* for their disregard for the law, gave them the following credit: “They were good-hearted and loved people in general; helped the poor and saved the distressed; were modest and not boastful.”⁷⁸

***Wuxia* [Gongfu] Narrative as a Genre of Social Protest**

The following couplet is often used to describe *xias*' activities: "Curbing the powerful and protecting the weak / Robbing the rich and giving to the poor." In doing so, *xias* openly challenged the injustice created by social hierarchy (what the modern West would call class inequality). *Xias* were classless, even though some of them came from aristocratic backgrounds. *Xias* left behind their class identities because of their contempt for an unjust system, and for the kind of power that the privileged could derive from it. As mentioned before, one of the most common themes in pre-modern Chinese *gongfu* narratives was the punishment of oppressive government officials by *xias* on behalf of the people. This theme became especially prevalent after Shi Naian's *Water Margin* (*Shui Hu Zhuan*). Shi told the story of one hundred and eight men forced into taking refuge in Mountain Liang (Liang Shan) as outlaws by their corrupted government. The virtuous people in the story were the outlaws—who robbed the rich and gave to the poor. The villains of the story were the state officials. The novel gave popularity to a number of sayings, including "lawlessness originated from the practices of the rulers" (*luan zi shang sheng*), "forced to take refuge in Mountain Liang" (*bi shang Liang Shan*), and "forced by the government into rebellion" (*guan bi min fan*). These sayings all allude to the same theme in *Water Margin*: it was the oppressive ruler's lawlessness which forced people into breaking the law. The *xia*, as upright as s/he was, disregarded the laws of an oppressive regime not because s/he was lawless; rather, s/he broke the unjust laws in pursuit of a higher form of justice. This is why *xias*' actions have been referred to for centuries by the Chinese as "executing Heaven's Justice" (*ti tien xin dao*) and "fighting on behalf of the people" (*wei min qin ming*).⁷⁹ It was Heaven's Justice, and not the ruler's

justice, that *xias* respected; it was the common people, and not the rich and powerful, for whose well-being *xias* risked their lives.

The *gongfu* genre is hence a genre of social protest, and *xias* were one of the many kinds of figures in Chinese culture who gave people dignity by giving them the legacy of a fighting spirit. The need to fight injustice instead of bowing down to an unjust authority is powerfully conveyed by yet another saying widely invoked in pre-modern China: “Decapitate me or bleed me to death as you wish, but you cannot compromise my integrity” (*Tou ke duan, xue ke liu, zhi bu ke qu*). For this reason, *xias* and *gongfu* narratives tended to blossom in times of state corruption. The society portrayed in the *gongfu* genre was usually plagued by the rule of tyrants. The first major flowering of *gongfu* literature took place in the latter half of the Tang dynasty as the emperor’s power began to decline and local lords and governors grew ambitious and oppressive. “Legend of the Spikebearded” (*Chiuyenke Zhuan*), “Red Thread” (*Hongxien*), and “Legend of Wushuang” (*Wushuang Zhuan*) were all written in this period.

Even more important to the emergence of *xias* were dynasties when China was subjected to foreign invasions and occupations. Many *xias*, for example, appeared in the Song dynasty, which was constantly plagued by foreign invasions. The Song dynasty since its very beginning had, under the emperors’ fear of losing power to the army, chosen to downplay military officials and deprived them of support whenever they needed reinforcement.⁸⁰ To prevent the army from growing “too strong,” some emperors and high officials even executed the most able and loyal generals. Yue Fei, for instance, was one of the hero-martyrs remembered with the greatest pain and admiration by the Chinese people for generations to come. In response to governmental corruption

and impotence, people had to take the law into their own hands. As a result, many *xias* appeared during this period. But their individual resistance here and there proved ineffective in resisting foreign invasions, and China finally fell to the Mongolians, under whose brutal rule Shi Naian wrote *The Water Margin*.

China had its second taste of brutal foreign rulers during the Qing dynasty. The Hans' oppression by the Manchurians was further complicated by Western invasions of China from the later half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It was not surprising that the Qing dynasty called forth by its brutality and corruption famous *xias* such as Hong Xiguan, Fang Shiyu, and Huang Feihong.

Gender

Women in *gongfu* narratives were free, skilful fighters. They were equal to men in both courage and martial arts skills. This was not a fantasy. History records famous women *xia* in pre-modern China, such as the Maiden of Yue,⁸¹ Lü Siliang, and Yen Yongchun.⁸² Gender hierarchy carried as little meaning as class hierarchy for the unconventional *xias*.⁸³

Women could become famous *xias* and generals, because they were not prevented from practising martial arts. “Song of Mulan”—the poem about the famous woman general Hua Mulan—was written in the North dynasty (*Bei Chao*), known for both male and female *gongfu* practitioners. Another poem from the same dynasty extolled the archery and riding skills of the maiden Li Yongyong (“*Li Anshi Zhuan*,” *Wei Shu*). Additional evidence can easily be found to discredit the popular stereotype that pre-modern Chinese women were kept weak and fragile.⁸⁴ *E Mei*, for example, was a highly

respected and powerful *gongfu* style practised exclusively by the nuns in the *E Mei* Temple. One of the two most popular *gongfu* styles nowadays are *Taiji* (*Tai Chi*) and *Yongchun* (*Wing Chun*). *Yongchun* was named after a woman who was allegedly its founder, and has been widely practised by both men and women. *Taiji* is a gentle style of combat, focusing on the *Yin* force which is associated with female qualities.

In addition to historical women *xias*, there were also many women *xias* in literary writings, legendary figures who continue to be celebrated after centuries, such as Nie Yinniang⁸⁵ and Hongxian.⁸⁶ Their stories have been repeatedly told in different styles of Chinese opera, in literary writings, in legends, and in paintings. Starting in the twentieth century, their stories have also been made into films over and over again. The wide popularity of these historical and legendary women in the Chinese imagination provides strong proof that women were widely accepted to be the equal of men in their ability to excel in *gongfu* skills and in virtues.

Conclusion

By contrasting the Chinese *xia* to the European knight, this essay explores the differences in the contents and meanings of feudalistic Chinese and Western martial ethics such as loyalty, honour, and generosity, and demonstrates how “similar” ethoi in the two cultures were inflected differently by their respective social and political contexts. By examining *xias* and knights in their social and political institutions, I demonstrate why knighthood excluded the poor and the female, and how chivalric romance supported the aristocracy. This helped me explain by contrast how *wuxia* narrative was a genre of social protest, and why it was the literature of the common people.

Notes

¹ This essay was the focus of discussion at a faculty seminar I gave on January 20, 2005 at Columbia University. A different version of this paper was delivered as a lecture at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on March 14, 2005. I would like to thank the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities for supporting me with a Senior Research Associateship in 2005-06, during which period I completed the revision of this essay.

² This essay is a shorter version of the introduction to my book project *Law Contra Society: Wuxia's Quest for Justice*. It provides an overview of issues that I develop in depth in subsequent chapters.

³ Even James Y. Liu who wrote the most authoritative English analysis to date of pre-modern *xia* literature made that mistake; Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (London: Routledge, 1967).

⁴ Since I am addressing feudal China and Medieval Europe, national identity will not be of much relevance for my paper. Nationalism was a phenomenon of modernity. Medieval Europe understood itself in terms of a common identity, one defined by Christendom. When the knights went on the Crusades, for instance, they did not present themselves as English, French, or Spanish knights against the Turks or Egyptians, but as Christians against Muslims, or European knights against the Infidels. Another proof of how little relevance nationhood had for knights was that they bonded much more readily with the nobility from other countries than with the *plebs* or *rustici* from their own country. The concept of national identity as we understand it today was of little significance to the European knights. In fact, the rise of nationhood spelled the decline of chivalry. This is why my essay addresses the culture of knights in Europe rather than that in any particular "nation."

⁵ The essay takes "narrative" as its subject of study because literature (*wen*), history (*shi*) and philosophy (*zhe*) were not regarded as different disciplines in pre-modern China. Western concepts of genre cannot be easily applied to pre-modern Chinese writings. "Wen," "shi," and "zhe" are not the strict equivalents of "literature," "history," and "philosophy," and they cannot be so easily separated as they are in the modern West. (Even in the West, history and literature used to have a much closer relationship—an ambiguity that is still discernible in European words such as *Geschichte*, *histoire*, and (hi-)story.)

Wuxia xiaoshuo (roughly translated as "wuxia fiction") provides a very good example of the inseparability of "wen" and "shi" in pre-modern China. One primary characteristics of *wuxia xiaoshuo* since its first mature form is its weaving of a fictive story or characters into a real historical setting. This has been a convention of the *wuxia* genre from *Water Margin* to the works of Jin Yong and other twentieth-century traditional *wuxia* novelists such as Liang Yüsheng. Only with the New School *wuxia* novelists is there a departure from this tradition.

As much as "wen" could not be isolated from "shi," "shi" was also not entirely independent of "wen." Historians in pre-modern China were evaluated not only for their reports on history, but also for their literary style as well as for their moral stance and their courage to criticize tyranny (hence the relationship of history to the Confucius ethics of *yi*.) These ways of judging historical scholarship are foreign to the West, especially the modern West.

⁶ Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1995), 5.

⁷ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 1.

⁸ See Ramon Lull, *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry* (Union City, California: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2001), Book IV.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Book II.

¹⁰ See Léon Gautier, *Chivalry* (London, New York: Routledge, 1891), 5.

¹¹ It is the horse that defined the era of chivalry and separated it from the age of the Roman Empire. See Léon Gautier, *Chivalry* (London, New York: Routledge, 1891), 5.

¹² Lull, 16.

¹³ Bonnie Wheeler, *King Arthur and Chivalry* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2000), 26.

¹⁴ *Cihai*, the Chinese equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary.

¹⁵ Gong never revealed the identity of this scholar.

¹⁶ Pangcheng Gong and Baochun Lin, eds., *Ershisi Shi Xiake Xiliao Huibian (Twenty-Four Historical Records of Information about Xias)* (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Bookstore, 1995) I.

¹⁷ Liu mistranslated "xia" as "knight-errant." I change all such mistranslation back to "xia."

¹⁸ I convert all Wade-Giles transliterations in my cited sources into *hanyu pinyin*.

¹⁹ James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (London: Routledge, 1967), 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ This was a position in the imperial court.

²² Liu, 5. There are many literary and historical accounts of the lives of Jing Ke and Hou Ying. English readers can consult Liu, 25-33 and 18-22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ This event was recorded by Sima Qian in “Zhao shijia” (*Shiji*), and was recast in dramatic form by Ji Junxiang in the Yuan Dynasty. Since Ji, the event has been remembered as “The Orphan of Zhao” after the title of his play. In Ji’s version, Linggong from the Kingdom of Jin during the Spring and Autumn period resented the constant admonishments from his imperial minister Zhao Dun, and planned to have Zhao assassinated. After observing Zhao for several days, the assassin sent by Linggong discovered his target to be a person of true integrity and an official fully dedicated to the well-being of the country and the people. Rather than carry out his assignment, the assassin committed suicide in order to preserve the life of the good minister. Sima’s version did not mention an assassin, but pointed out that Zhao was rescued from Linggong’s attempt on his life by a chef. Both the assassin in the play and the chef in Sima’s account have come to be associated with “*xia*” in the Chinese popular imagination.

²⁶ There was no incompatibility between the *xias*’ rebelliousness against oppressive rulers and their commitment to their country and people. This commitment was emotional rather than institutional in nature—similar to the *xias*’ intense loyalty to their friends. Furthermore, it is especially important to understand that the Chinese did not equate the country with the emperor, especially with an oppressive emperor. The separations between the emperor, the country, and the people are evident, for example, in Mencius’ famous doctrine: “The people are the most precious; the Head of the State weighs little; the country is secondary.” This non-equivalence explains why there is no contradiction in fighting an oppressive ruler and defending one’s country and people. For example, many *xias* in the late Qing Dynasty fought both foreign occupiers and the Qing government—and they did so on behalf of the people and the country.

²⁷ “Wu Da Pian,” Chapter 49 of *Han Feizi*.

²⁸ As explained in n. 5, pre-modern China did not draw a strong distinction between history and literature. Chinese historians often reported on the inner thoughts and emotions of their “characters.” In Book 43 of *Shi Ji*, for example, Sima Qian reported on Madame Zhao’s secret prayer to Heaven when the soldiers searched her chamber for the orphan of Zhao: “If the Zhao family are meant to die out, let my baby cry; if not, let him remain silent.” Pre-modern Chinese literary critics and historians always characterised *xias* as “carefree and open-hearted” (*haofang*). This tradition continues until today. A Western reader might find this practice to be a subjective projection of the historian’s emotions. But in pre-modern China where there was little conceptual distinction between “subjective” and “objective,” and people did not conceive of themselves as contained inside a “self,” it was never questioned that historians could identify and empathise with the inner emotions of the people they were recording.

²⁹ Liu, 6.

³⁰ Sima Qian, *Shiji (Historical Records)* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji Publishing Company, 1997), 309.

³¹ Liu, 5.

³² Such extreme passion, by the way, is one incompatibility between *xias* and mainstream Confucianism, with the latter preaching moderation:

“S/He who is too passionate will not live long;

S/He who is too overbearing will induce insults on himself/herself;

The modest and civil person is gentle and glows quietly like a piece of jade.”

The poem is derived from Confucius’ teaching to Zigong. See Liu Dianjue and Chen Fangzheng, eds., *Li ji zhu zi suo yin* (Taipei: Taiwan shuan wu, 1992), 174, section 49, 1. 11.

³³ Liu, 196.

³⁴ Max Weber, “The Routinization of Charisma” in Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., *Economy and Society*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 248.

³⁵ I put “class” inside quotation marks because the origin of this word was associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie. Some traced its first appearance to the writings of Daniel Defoe. “Class” in this strict sense did not really exist in pre-modern China.

³⁶ Wheeler, 26.

³⁷ Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi* (Shanghai: Shanghai shu dian, 1990.)

³⁸ Lao Gan, “Lun handai de youxia,” *Taida wenshizhe xuebao* 1 (1950).

³⁹ I put “qualify” inside quotation marks because *xia*hood was not a title, nor was it a position or a rank granted by an institution.

⁴⁰ Note that even *jiankes* and *shis* were not specifically tied to any particular class.

⁴¹ Tao Xisheng, *Bianshi yu youxia* (S.I: Shangwu, 1931).

⁴² Yang, Liensheng, “The Concept of *Pao* as a Basis for Social Relations in China” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

⁴³ Liu, 196.

⁴⁴ Sima, 305.

⁴⁵ Gautier, 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ For details, see Sidney Painter’s *French Chivalry* (New York: Great Seal Books, 1940).

⁴⁸ In the age of chivalry, knights were drawn from the ruling class and were naturally noble (Lull, *Chivalry*, 51), but often served and defended another lord’s land, and those who did own their own land often served a king or a lord who had given them that land.

⁴⁹ Barber, 21.

⁵⁰ Liu, 196.

⁵¹ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Knopf, 2003) 56.

⁵² See Braudy.

⁵³ Sima, 390.

⁵⁴ Sima 390; translation adopted with some modifications from Liu, 15.

⁵⁵ Keen, 211.

⁵⁶ This, by the way, was the general principle of *gongfu* matches under the influence of *xia* culture. The point of matches was supposed to be a friendly exchange of ideas about *gongfu* techniques. It was meant to be a learning experience for both sides, and not an occasion for acquiring domination over—much less for harming—the other party. Note also that Chinese *gongfu* matches had no parade of expensive armour, weapons, and horses. The focus was entirely on *gongfu* skills.

⁵⁷ This was another aspect of *xia*hood which conflicted with Confucian values and dominant social beliefs in pre-modern China. Confucianism attributes great significance to home and homeland.

⁵⁸ This was another way the *xias* dissented from Confucian values and traditional Chinese ethics.

⁵⁹ Gautier, 20.

⁶⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-18.

⁶¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 552-72.

⁶² Sima, 390.

⁶³ This connection is foregrounded in the close connections between “proper,” “property,” and “propriety” in English, as well as the multiple links with “*propre*” in French, “*proprio*” in Spanish, and “*Eigen*” in German.

⁶⁴ See Tan Xitong’s *Ren xue* on this subject. An eclectic thinker well versed in philosophies and religions of East and West, Tan’s greatest admiration was reserved for Buddhism, in particular its spirit of compassion and equanimity toward death.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2 of Painter’s *French Chivalry*.

⁶⁶ Barber, 372.

⁶⁷ Liu, 4.

⁶⁸ The Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, and the *xias* are all similar to Weber’s charismatic figures in this regard. Another Weberian observation on the charismatic figure is also pertinent for understanding the *xia*: “From the point of view of rational economic activity, charismatic want satisfaction is a typical anti-economic force. It repudiates any sort of involvement in the everyday routine world” (Weber, 245).

There are many affinities between the *xia* and Weber's charismatic leader. But the significant divergence is that the *xia* was not interested in politics and revolutions, and this despite his/her radical subversion of the establishment. Above all, *s/he had no interest in becoming a leader.*

⁶⁹ Sima, 392.

⁷⁰ Lull, 35.

⁷¹ Peter of Blois, *Epistolae*, xciv, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 216, 293-7; quoted by Barber, 371.

⁷² Quoted by Barber, 371.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 173.

⁷⁵ Note, however, that the *xia* was by no means executing "private" justice. Rather, *s/he* was truly carrying out "people's justice," since the *xia* was merely helping the people to execute their will in the absence of an adequately powerful, or just, state office or official who could help them do the same. People's justice was carried out via different means in traditional China and in the modern West. In the modern West, the belief in popular sovereignty means that people's justice is expressed and executed through state law. In traditional China, since power was monopolised by the ruler(s), people's justice could often take place only when people took justice into their own hands.

⁷⁶ The ruler referred to here was not necessarily the Emperor. As the Chinese saying goes, "The Emperor is far and away." A lot more often, those who abused the common folk were local "rulers," such as warlords, or state officials of whichever rank, who harassed and exploited the common people in the name of the Emperor.

⁷⁷ Elias, 176.

⁷⁸ Quoted by Liu, 7.

⁷⁹ This thought is so deeply ingrained in the *wuxia* tradition that the theme is still invoked from time to time in recent *gongfu* movies, such as *Iron Monkey* and *The Tai Chi Master* (both Yuen Wo-ping, Hong Kong, 1993). It is, however, increasingly deemphasised in more commercialised movies catering to a global audience.

⁸⁰ It was under such circumstances that the Yang family lost almost all of its male generals, thus forcing the women to take charge of the situation and to go to fight in their place. This is the famous half-history, half-legend known as "The Women General of Yang." As regards the historical and fictive elements in this legend, see He Guanwan, *Beisong wujiang renjiu (Generals in North Song)* (Xianggang: Zhonghua Bookstore, 2003), 385-436 and Tang Kaijian, "The Prototype of Mu Guiying Came from Tangut" (*Northwest Minorities Research* 1, 2001), 65-73.

⁸¹ The Maiden of Yue was invited by the Gou Jian—the Lord of Yue—to train his troops. It was recorded in "The Conspiracy of Gou Jian" (*Gou jian yinmou waizhuan*), *Annals of the Kingdoms of Wu and Yue (Wu-Yue chungiu)*, by Zhao Ye (1st century AD). Some suspected that this book contains more fiction than history. Nevertheless, the fact that the story of the Maiden of Yue has been so popular in China for centuries is good proof that women *xia* are as much accepted and admired in Chinese culture as are their male counterparts.

⁸² For more detail, see *Nüzi wushu da guan (A Record of Female Gongfu)*, authored by Jiang Xiahun, a revolutionary.

⁸³ The few "feminist" remarks in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (USA/Taiwan/Hong Kong/China, 2000) do not exist in the novel and seem to have been added to the film to cater to Western taste. In the film, Jade Fox claims that she hates *Wudang* so much because its former leader "looked down on women." This is simply not true either according to the novel or to history. *Wudang* has always excluded women much as *E Mei Pai* (not *E Mei Shan* in general) used to exclude men—purely for religious reasons and for the sake of removing sexual stimulation that could interfere with Daoist and Buddhist spiritual and *gongfu* training. The gender segregation has nothing to do with discrimination against men or women. A brief explanation of Chinese philosophical thoughts here may help dispel some popular stereotypes about premodern Chinese women. People not familiar with pre-modern Chinese language and culture sometimes think that traditional China discouraged women from developing any strength, be it spiritual, intellectual, or physical. In reality, of the three major philosophical traditions in traditional China, gender discrimination existed only in Confucianism (and more so in neo-Confucianism than in the original teachings of Confucius). Daoism advocates harmonising *yin* and *yang*, and regards the domination of either one by the other as a disruption of cosmic balance. Although gender discrimination existed (and still does)

in institutionalised Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy itself looks upon discrimination and domination of any kind as the practice of the unenlightened and as the origin of human suffering.

⁸⁴ Generally, such stereotypes are harboured by those who overlook the fact that Chinese culture is extremely diverse due to its long history and its ethnic diversity. The Tang Dynasty, for example, was known for strong women. Many famous *gongfu* narratives at this time feature female protagonists who are stronger than men. But according to some historical accounts, it was also in this dynasty that some other women started the fashion of foot-binding.

⁸⁵ The story is commonly credited to the authorship of Pei Xing (fl. 880; Tang dynasty).

⁸⁶ The tale is attributed by some to Yang Juyuan (late 8th century), and by others to Yuan Zhiao (late 9th century; Tang dynasty).