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The Chinese *Xia* versus the European Knight: Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives[1]

Gongfu practitioners who upheld justice and protected the weak from the strong in pre-modern China were known as *xia*s. *Xia*s 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 *xia*s and the traditional Chinese values they embody and represent.[2] By returning to the Chinese classics to study *xia*s in their original linguistic and cultural settings, I hope to correct certain widespread misunderstandings of *xia*s 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

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 *xia*s of antiquity, we have no means of obtaining information." However, it is evident that *xia*s long predated the Warring States, since there are many songs about *xia*s 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, *xia*s were recorded in serious historical texts such as *Zuo Zhuan* and *Book of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo Ce*

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 *xia*s 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 *xia*hood. The primary importance of moral qualities for *xia*hood 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 "*Xia*s and the Chinese Culture" by an unnamed scholar cited by Gong Pangcheng:[15] *xia*s 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 *xia*hood, 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 *xia*s as “hating injustice like an enemy” (

Hou Ying and [Jing Ke]."[22] While a *xia* was always willing to die for those who appreciated him, Liu erred in thinking that *xia*s were committed merely to "personal loyalty"[23] and "private justice," and that "they thought in terms of individuals, not of society as a whole."

something close to what the West calls natural law. For this reason, *xia*s 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 *xia*s. 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 *xia*hood 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, *xia*s "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 *xia*s, admitted that *xia*s "established standards of integrity to distinguish their names." This was a remarkable testimony to the *xia*s' integrity, since the legalists who believed in the absolute authority of the law were normally sworn enemies of *xia*s. Han, of all legalists, was especially known for his accusation that "Confucianists subvert the state with scholarly rhetoric; *xia*s violate the law with force" (*Ru yi wen luan fa; xia yi wu fan jin*).[27] Even then, he was impressed by the *xia*s' integrity.

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

First of all, *xia*s 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, "[redacted] [*xia*] might receive handsome sums from friends without any embarrassment, a[redacted] Xie] did; or refuse an offer of household effects worth several million cash[redacted] Zhang] did…. [They] either lived lavishly while sharing their luxury w[redacted] lived modestly while giving money to the poor."[29]

*Xia*s were equally free from the trappings of social con[redacted] hesitate to openly defy the law should it stand in the way o[redacted] similar disregard for social conventions. Sima Qian re[redacted] (ob. 227 BC) with a dog butcher and a musician in[redacted] drank in public, singing and weeping in turn, p[redacted]ight think."[30] James Liu described the *xia*s as re[redacted] any rigid regimentation. They had little res[redacted]ventions of behaviour of the society in which t[redacted]

Above all, a *xian t*[redacted]

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 *xia*s 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 *xia*s. 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 *xia*s. Although the Shaolin Temple can be called an "institution," there is no Shaolin Club of *Xia*s. This is the difference between *xia*s 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

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*. *Xia*s came from all kinds of backgrounds (from plebeians to nobilities); their training process, in particular, effectively erased their social differences. Many *xia*s 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 *xia*s, I beg to differ from Feng Youlan[37] and Lao Gan.[38] They held that *xia*s were desperate, unemployed peasants, artisans, and commoners who became professional warriors. Their mistake consists of confusing *xia* with *shi* and *jianke*. *Shi*s and *jianke*s 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] *xia*s 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 *xia*s 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 *xia*s were possibly impoverished nobles left over from the old feudal order.[42] Tao and Yang noticed a

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

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 solider."[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 *xia*s' 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]

xia

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

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

Both knights and *xia*s 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] *Xia*s, 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 *xia*s' 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 *xia*s 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 [*xia*s], 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, *xia*s were not hired by anyone. Like the Buddhist monks and Daoist priests, *xia*s 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 *xia*s as a pest to be eliminated. Indeed, *xia*s 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 *xia*s 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 *xia*s 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

common men. His vow raised him up above the common solider, 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 *xia*s 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 *xia*s' activities: "Curbing the powerful and protecting the weak / Robbing the rich and giving to the poor." In doing so, *xia*s openly challenged the injustice created by social hierarchy (what the modern West would call class inequality). *Xia*s were classless, even though some of them came from aristocratic backgrounds. *Xia*s 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 *xia*s 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" (*Shuihuzhuan* of o:g S(t)-6(a)4(n)-10(Po)-3(ro-2(ve)4( )-10(g)10(ovc)4(i)-

justice, that *xia*s respected; it was the common people, and not the rich and powerful, for whose well-

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 *xia*s, there were also many women *xia*s in literary writings, legendary figures who continue to be celebrated after centuries, such as Nie Yinniang[85] and Hongxian.[86] Their stories have been repeatedly told in different styles of Chinese opera, in literary writings, in lege[illegible] *tcer0 Tc 0 Tw -31.1 -265 Td [(c)4(ol)-4(m)-4(fy*

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]

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 whmee4 Tc -0.00pnh.88 0 oer006 Tc -0, thole inocler, te iv2*

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).