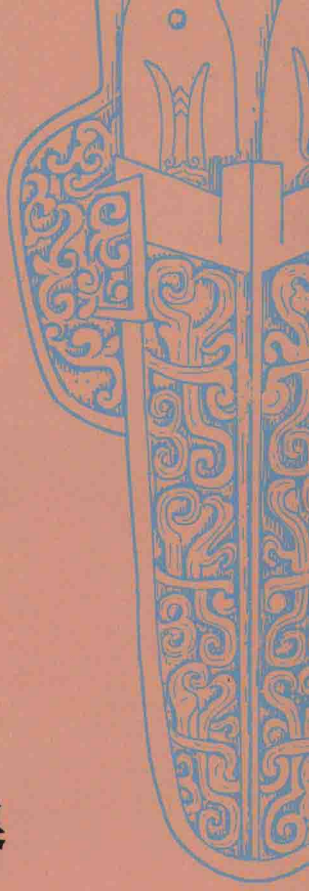

An Appreciation of Ancient Chinese Weapons

中国古代兵器图鉴

于孟晨 刘磊◎著
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China has a 5,000 year written history where the trials, tribulations, achievements and discoveries of each dynasty have been recorded. The development of a variety of ancient weapons was an integral part of the nation's achievements and played no small part in the successes of various dynastic accomplishments. This book is the result of two years' research involving the careful study of relevant available material, the collection of photographic records and drawings of relics, the discovery of new information and the organization of documents into a logical order. Because of the limitation of length and reality, the four hundred pictures can only present a basic introduction into the colorful world of ancient weapons. It is hoped that the reader will be motivated to continue and can gain a general knowledge of the ancient weapons in China.

We acknowledge the assistance of staff from the China National Museum, Capital Museum, Shaanxi History Museum, Henan Museum, Hubei Museum, Hebei Museum, Shanxi Museum, Tibet Museum, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum, Guangdong Museum, Baoji Bronze Museum, Luoyang Museum, Changsha Museum, and the Lugu Lake Museum. Their help and intimate knowledge of ancient Chinese weapons and their historical resources has been of great assistance.

Yu Mengchen was responsible for the compilation of this book. Liu Lei took photographs of the weapons in the book. Chen Hong researched and wrote Chapters One, Four and Five. He Zhi and Su Qian researched and wrote Chapters Four and Five. Wang Zuji researched and wrote Chapters Three, Eight and Nine. Li Yining researched and wrote Chapter Seven. Wang Jia researched and wrote Chapter Two. Niu Fang researched and wrote Chapter Six and Hu Jiwu contributed to this acknowledgement. In addition, Hu Jiwu and Wen Xiao spent time and effort improving the drawings and photographs in this book, while Li Jingfang and Tian Meng were responsible for proofreading and standardizing the layout.

Zhang Hua translated Chapters One to Three, and Yang Jing translated Chapters Four to Nine, into the English language.

This book is the product of the joint efforts of the Xi'an Technological University staff and students. Without their dedication, the publication of this book would not be possible. Once again, let me extend my deepest gratitude to all of them.

Yu Mengchen,
Xi'an Technological University

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INTRODUCTION

Ancient weapons enjoy a long recorded history in China, beginning in the Stone Age. Modern weapons, like the bayonet, dagger, spontoon[1], explosion shield, and fire arrows can be found in some references to Chinese ancient weapons and their development may be traced from this time. During the early wars which continued for thousands of years, Chinese people invented and created a variety of lethal ancient weapons using the advanced technologies of that time, and initiated an extremely brilliant chapter of Chinese history. These weapons were the fruits of Chinese wisdom, bravery and creativity, and combined the technological, scientific, aesthetic, social and historical factors of that time. The records of ancient weapons are an important window and opportunity for readers to explore the Chinese ancient wars, military systems, history, social development, aesthetics, science and technology.

Chinese ancient weapons were developed from the hunting and agricultural tools of those times, and were refined through subsequent stages of stone, bronze, and iron weapons to ancient firearms. The initial three stages were called the Cold Weapon Stage, and the latter was a combination of Cold Weapons and gunpowder weapons. The development of the ancient weapons was directed by a complicated structure requiring ease of handling, excellent performance and lethal effect. This exerted a deep impact on the weapons of the world, and on world civilization. Meanwhile, the invention of gunpowder in China and the subsequent development of gunpowder weaponry in the West initiated the epoch-making worldwide innovation of weapons. Later, the Chinese nation learnt a hard lesson when a government close door policy halted the vitality and creativity of all industrial development. After the Opium Wars, European nations with advanced warships, modern armies and weaponry gradually brought the splendid history of Chinese ancient weapons to a close.

Chinese ancient weapons enjoyed a great variety and quantity. In the pre-Qin period, there was a saying of "*Wu Bing*" that referred to a set of five different arms equipping the armies of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1122 BC-771 BC) and the Spring and Autumn Period (772 BC-481 BC). According to the *Record of the North Expedition of Cui Wei* , a book on the art of war in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), the idea of 18 martial arts was first mentioned. The book became popular after the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) but the detailed content of the 18 Martial Arts was not fully explained in that book. In Xie Zhaozhe's *Wu Za Zu*, which was written about the natural history, and Zhu Guozhen's *Yong Zhuang*

1 A spontoon, sometimes known as a half-pike, is a type of pole-arm that came into being alongside the pike. Unlike the pike, which was an extremely long weapon (typically 3 meters), the spontoon measured only 2 meters in overall length. Generally, this weapon featured a more elaborate head than the typical pike. The head of a spontoon often had a pair of smaller blades on each side, giving the weapon the look of a military fork, or a trident.

INTRODUCTION

Xiao Pin (Literary Sketches of the Ming Dynasty), the 18 Martial Arts were clearly defined as the bow, crossbow, lance, sabre, sword, spear, shield, axe, tomahawk, halberd, whip, mace, scratcher, pike, fork, rake, lasso, and unarmed combat. The former 17 arts refer to weapons, and the latter implied fighting with hands and legs. In the Ming Dynasty, Shi Naian put forward a different kind of explanation in the book, *Water Margin*. He viewed the 18 Martial Arts as the use of 18 different kinds of arms, which were the lance, halberd, staff, tomahawk, fork, flute[1], hook, a long spear, loop, sabre, sword, tonfa, axe, whip, mace, hammer and club. Nevertheless, in the modern times we regard the 18 weapons as sabre, lance, sword, halberd, axe, tomahawk, hook, fork, whip, mace, hammer, claw, trident, pike, staff, tonfa and flail.

In fact, there were many more weapons in addition to these 18 kinds of ancient weapons in ancient China. If we take the firearms, large offensive and defensive weapons of a city, chariots and warships into consideration, the total number might exceed one hundred. Perhaps, to improve the classification of weapons, a more stringent method should be implemented that clearly defines their usage and application in battle. In this book, we have categorized the type of ancient weapons as long weapons, short weapons, long-range weapons, flexible weapons, hidden weapons, armours, firearms, chariots, warships, and the offensive and defensive weapons of a city to develop a concept of the basic framework of the Chinese ancient weapons.

The ancient Chinese people wrote many books describing weaponry and arms and introducing specific characters and words to describe the shape, structure, usage, and technologies associated with the ancient weapons. Some of these records contained the visual and graphic drawings. A record of the weapons and equipment of the army can be found in *Wu Jing ZongYao* (a Military Manual officially compiled in the Northern Song Dynasty, 960-1127), Mao Yuanyi's *Wu Bei Zhi* (a military encyclopedia in Tian Qi Period in the Ming Dynasty, 1606-1627), and Qi Jiguang's *The Troop-training Records* and *A Book on Military Training.* (These last two books were written by this famous army General fighting against Japanese Pirates during the Ming Dynasty). The publications, *General Military Principles* and *Wu Bei Zhi* contained a large number of drawings of weapons.

As technology developed further complex firearms, and as these weapons found increasingly application by the army, publications detailing their use and maintenance became available. These books contained a combination of drawings and texts. The most important books are considered to be Zhao Shizhen's *Firearms Guides* (a book written in Wan Li Period, 1573-1620 in the Ming Dynasty), Sun Yuanhua's *Firearms in Western Countries* (a book published in the fifth year of Emperor Chong Zhen in 1632) and Jiao Xu's *Basic Skills of Firearms Attack* (a book published in the 16th year of Emperor Chong Zhen in 1632). On the basis of these books, and the research on ancient Chinese weapons undertaken by previous authors, this book has attempted to undertake a detailed review of the development of many kinds of ancient weapons and classify them in accordance with their use. This book describes and

1 The flute, a musical instrument adapted for martial arts, was originally made of bamboo. Flutes were later made of iron, brass and other metals. A spring loaded short dagger or sword would often be hidden inside.

illustrates many of those typical weapons, many with a considerable cultural value, in order to achieve an accurate and informative presentation of construction materials, visual drawings, and a precise explanation in an uncomplicated and easy to understand manner.

It is hoped that the reader might be motivated to discover the history and culture associated with the development and use of ancient Chinese weapons and arms, so that they might attain a personal and accurate knowledge of Chinese heritage.

1 LONG WEAPONS

There was no exact size standard to classify long or short weapons. Generally speaking, long weapons were handled in both hands, and were of a length that was equal to, or exceeded the height of a normal adult. These long weapons included the dagger-axe, spear, lance, sabre, halberd, long axe, tomahawk, staff, a long handled spear and a short sword. The materials that shaped the weapons gradually changed from stone to bronze and finally to iron. The variety, shape, structure and usage of these individual weapons improved with time as warfare tactics changed to reflect the policies of different dynasties and as the manufacturing technology developed.

The long weapons were suitable for engaging the enemy at a distance, depending on the length of the weapon. Compared with short weapons, they had an advantage where the enemy could be engaged at a distance and, perhaps, enabled combatants of unequal physical size to enter a conflict where the skill of use of the weapon determined the output.

These long weapons were important equipment of the troops in different ages, and the essential weapon in the eras when the chariots were used as the main attacking weapon.

1.1 DAGGER-AXE

The dagger-axe was an important long weapon in the ancient times, and was used to attack, stab or slash the enemy. It has been generally acknowledged that it evolved from agricultural tools, like the sickle or scythe, and was widely used in the times of chariot battles from Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the Warring States Period.

The dagger-axe was composed of a head, a curved dagger-shaped blade, sometimes with a rear axe-shaped blade, mounted by the tang[1] on the head on a long wooden shaft. The head of a dagger-axe was mounted at the top of the weapon and was constructed in a standard form that included a curved lethal blade, shaped like a dagger mounted at right angles, and a tang to fix the dagger-axe to the shaft. The use of the weapon involved a thrusting the vertical spear head towards the enemy's head, as a feint, then decapitating the foe by pulling the scythe like blade backwards. The shaft of the dagger-axe was made of bamboo or wood, with the base fitted with a bronze queue[2].

1 Tang: A projection from the blade of a knife by which it may be firmly mounted to its handle or shaft.

2 A queue is a sharp steel spike on the butt of the dagger-axe shaft.

The dagger-axe, which was unearthed at the Erlitou Site in Yanshi, Henan province, has been estimated to be at least 3,500 years of age. It was the earliest historic relic detected at that site. During the Erlitou period, the shape and structure of the bronze dagger-axe was relatively simple, similar to a narrow dagger with straight or curved blade, but without the guard[1]. The base of the blade, the tang, was recessed to enable the shaft to be securely fitted to the head.

In the middle of the Shang Dynasty, a new kind of dagger axe emerged in the Hanzhong Region of Shaanxi. Its blade became broader and triangular shaped. This important period of the dagger-axe's development evolved during the later period of the Shang Dynasty, when the dagger-axes possessed more shapes and structures, such as the dagger with straight blade or with a curved blade, and with blades cast in a decorative designs and inscriptions.

The dagger-axe in the Western Zhou Dynasty inherited the shape and structure with a rectangular rear blade. In the later period of the Shang Dynasty, even greater progress was made where the angle between the dagger blade and the dagger base was increased to 100 degrees from its original 90 degrees. The dagger base was also extended to form a symmetrical head with two extensions either side of the central reinforcing ridge.

There were additional different shapes of the dagger-axe introduced in Spring and Autumn Period, such as the dagger-axe with short dagger blade and wide rear blade, the dagger-axe with narrow dagger blade and long base extension, and the dagger-axe with a jade dagger blade.

The jade dagger-axe had a symmetrical dagger with the outer width of the blade increasing slightly[2]. This created an impression of increased strength and power, implying increased lethality. At this time, the base of the dagger was extended above and below the central ridge of the dagger so that the dagger blade resembled a double sided scythe. At the beginning of the Warring States Period the dagger blade and the rectangular rear blade had undergone major change. The shape of the dagger blade had become curved and offensive barbs were fitted to the blade base extensions. The shape of the rectangular rear blade was also altered that create an axe-like weapon with additional offensive capability.

During the Warring States Period, iron weapons became more widely used as the metallurgical industry in China developed and at the same time the bronze dagger-axe was replaced by the iron halberd. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, the dagger-axe was no longer used as a weapon in the battlefield and became traditional weapons in sacrificial ceremonies and rituals.

---

1 The guard of a sword hilt is to protect the wielder's hand. It may take of the shape of a simple bar, a steel basket, a flat disc, or several other forms.

2 Similar to the shape of a modern axe head.

Picture 1-1 Bronze Dagger-axe Embedded with Turquoise[1] (The Shang Dynasty)

Picture 1-2 Dagger-axe with a Broad Blade (The Shang Dynasty)

1 Bronze Dagger-axe Embedded with Turquoise: It was made in the Period of King Wuding in the Shang Dynasty and was unearthed from the Fuhao Tomb of Yin ruins in Anyang City, Henan Province.

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