

# Chivalry of the Chinese Heroes: A Character Sketch of the Knights-Errant and the Assassins in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*

Nop Oungbho<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article looks into a character sketch of the historical knights-errant and assassins as depicted in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*. Both groups of people are featured in two chapters of the *Records*, which are 'Biographies of the Knights-errant' and 'Biographies of the Assassins', respectively, including how they were born to the society, what they did, their social positions and ideals towards their own acts, and how different groups of people thought about them. The article would also discuss the Chinese-style heroism, which has influenced many writers in creating the works of fiction about 'wuxia' (martial hero or warrior) in later periods as well.

**Keywords:** *Chinese knight-errant, heroism, Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*

---

<sup>1</sup> Nop Oungbho, Ph.D. candidate, Chinese Section, Department of Eastern Languages, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. E-mail: huangtianci@gmail.com

## Introduction

Amongst the historical records of the ancient China, Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*<sup>2</sup>, which will later be referred as '*Shiji*' (Chinese: 史記, literally 'The Historical Records'), is one of the principle and most influential documents that many have trusted. It was compiled and written by Sima Qian (司馬遷), an official in the imperial court in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), succeeding the works of his father Sima Tan (司馬談), who was also a historian of that period. *Shiji* covers the history of ancient China from the age of the Yellow Emperor (黃帝) to the reign of Emperor Han Wudi (漢武帝), which is the time of the author's own life. It comprises 120 volumes of classical texts, mostly biographies of historical individuals, such as kings, emperors, sages and generals, etc.

While several volumes of annals and biographies are about the ruling class or aristocrats, 'Biographies of the Knights-errant' ('*Youxia Liezhuan*' 遊俠列傳, volume 124) and 'Biographies of the Assassins' ('*Cike Liezhuan*' 刺客列傳, volume 86) are two volumes specifically devoted to the lives of the knights-errant and assassins in the history. These people generally are commoners who performed memorable chivalrous acts, some notably

---

<sup>2</sup> The 'Grand Historian' or '*Tai Shi Gong*' (太史公) is the title Sima Qian referred to himself in the records.

without the use of force or weaponry, and had gradually become the ‘people’s heroes’, even before ‘*xia*’ (chivalry or hero) became associated with ‘*wu*’ (martial or armed).

### 1. About the knight-errant

Those who were growing up in the 70’s or 80’s Thailand, especially the ones who are of Chinese descendants, may have been familiar with the words ‘*kamlang phainai*’ (กำลังภายใน) and ‘*jomyut*’ (จอมยุทธ์), one way or another, due to the vast popularisation of novels, TV series or films that feature the martial arts, or the *wuxia* contents. One can easily picture a wandering swordsman (or swordswoman), travelling through mountains and villages, in search of a master to learn from and perfect the craft in martial arts, or to find the most evil archenemy in order to avenge for the loved ones. These martial arts heroes (or heroines) are called *xia* (俠) in Mandarin Chinese, which are aptly translated into English as ‘knight-errant’<sup>3</sup>. The stories of the knights-errant are repeatedly told in popular media, and we are simply entertained by their elaborate sword fights and the courageous acts of the characters. These stories always have us wonder

---

<sup>3</sup> James Liu explained that the term ‘knight-errant’ is by far close enough to the original, and the least misleading of several other translations, i.e. ‘cavalier’, ‘adventurer’, or ‘soldier of fortune’. (Liu, 1979: xii)

whether such people really did exist in Chinese history, or were they merely just a myth? So before these martial arts heroes had established themselves in the realms of literature, we have to venture their historical background to better understand their social positions.

The knight-errant first appeared during the Warring States period (戰國, 475-221 B.C.)<sup>4</sup>, amongst many social unrests and the founding of various schools of intellect, i.e. Confucianism (儒家), Taoism (道家), Legalism (法家), and Mohism (墨家). While these schools of philosophers and thinkers were trying to persuade the feudal rulers to follow their way, the knights-errant simply took justice in their own hands, to right the wrongs, and to help the poor and the distressed, regardless of the law. Han Fei Zi (韓非子), The leader of Legalism, once expressed his opinion about the knights-errant in the article called *Wu Du* (五蠹) or Five Vermin<sup>5</sup>, he stated:

---

<sup>4</sup> According to many historians, the beginning of the Warring States period ranges from 481-403 B.C. Sima Qian said the period began during the first year of King Yuan of Zhou (周元王) which is 475 B.C., Sima Guang said it began in the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of King Weilie (周威烈王) which is 403 B.C., and Lü Zuqian said it began in the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Duke Ai of Lu (魯哀公) which is 481 B.C. (Zheng Tianting, and Tan Qixiang, eds, 2000: 2149) This article uses Sima Qian's choice of 475 B.C.

<sup>5</sup> According to Han Fei, there were five groups of people who were harmful to the law, namely the scholars (學者), the orators (言談者), the sword bearers (帶劍者), the officials (患御者), and the craftsmen and the merchants

*‘The Confucian scholars confuse the law with their writings, while the knights-errant violate the prohibitions by force. Yet the rulers of men treat both with courtesy. That is why there is disorder.’* (Sima Qian 司馬遷, 2010: 2413.)

(Translation by James J. Y. Liu)

This is an obvious proof that Han Fei Zi did not approve of the principles of both the Confucian scholars and the knight-errant. Due to the fact that Han Fei was promoting the sanctity of the law, these two groups of people would be great obstacles to his belief and execution. While the former valued morality above all rules, the latter simply discarded the law, and did what they saw was right instead. According to the chivalrous acts they usually performed, the knights-errant were often criticised for not paying any respect to the law of the states. So naturally, they became the state’s rebels, especially in the eye of the Legalists.

The knights-errant were often conceived as independent fighters who possessed an exceptional ability to use different kinds of weapons or superhuman force to fight crimes, and somehow became good vigilantes whom people expected help or rescue from.

---

(工商之民). The aforementioned ‘sword bearers’ are undoubtedly the knights-errant.

Apart from the typical looks many have envisioned, the knights-errant were actually very diverse in terms of appearances and their principles. According to several books about knights-errant, there have been many types of *xia* throughout Chinese historiography (Teo, 2009: 3; Wang Qi 王齊, 1997: 49-83), they were generally categorised by:

1) their action, such as *youxia* (遊俠 wandering knight-errant), *yinxia* (隱俠 hermit knight-errant), and *daoxia* (盜俠 bandit knight-errant);

2) their social status or gender, such as *qingxiang zhi xia* (卿相之俠 royal knight-errant), *buyi zhi xia* (布衣之俠 plebeian knight-errant), *sengxia* (僧俠 monk knight-errant), and *nüxia* (女俠 female knight-errant);

3) their principles or intellect, such as *yixia* (義俠 upright knight-errant), *haoxia* (豪俠 heroic knight-errant), and *ruxia* (儒俠 Confucian knight-errant); or

4) their fighting ability or strength, such as *jianxia* (劍俠 sword-carrying knight-errant), and *wuxia* (武俠 combative knight-errant).

While knights-errant are usually seen as commoners, many scholars actually believe that their former status could be of higher or lower class. In *Han Shu* (漢書) or the Book of Han, Ban Gu (班固) has mentioned Four Princes of the Warring States (戰國四公子), which are Xinling Jun from

the State of Wei (魏國信陵君), Pingyuan Jun from the State of Zhao (趙國平原君), Mengchang Jun from the State of Qi (齊國孟嘗君), and Chunshen Jun from the State of Chu (楚國春申君). These four princes were born in the feudal lords' families, but they liked to lead the life of the knight-errant. Their courageous acts gained respect and admiration from many people. Weng Lixue's article describes that the knights-errant came from many social backgrounds, some used to be Confucian scholars, some were the former Mohists, and some were high class warriors who lost their royal statuses. (Weng Lixue 翁麗雪, 1986: 23-27) Weng also wrote about the knights-errant's attitudes towards worldly matters and human interrelations, which are:

- 1) They do not value wealth or any possessions,
- 2) They like to help those in distress,
- 3) They like to travel and meet people,
- 4) They take revenge for those who are wrongly done,
- 5) They are willing to give up their life for others, and
- 6) They value truth and honesty. (Weng, 1986: 40-44)

These are the idealistic features the knights-errant should possess, which would make them the ideal figures that

are selfless, dauntless, free-spirited, and noble. And people would indisputably look up to them as heroes.

## 2. The Knights-errant and the Assassins in *Shiji*

### 2.1 The Knights-errant in *Shiji*

*Youxia Liezhuan* or the 'Biographies of the Knights-errant' is the 124<sup>th</sup> volume in *Shiji*. It depicts the lives of Zhu Jia (朱家), Ju Meng (劇孟), and Guo Xie (郭解) who were the famous knights-errant during the early Han period.

In the introduction, Sima has made a clear statement about why he wrote this chapter:

*To save people from distress and relieve people from want: is it not benevolence? Not to belie another's trust and not to break one's promises: such conduct a righteous man would approve. That is why I wrote the 'Biographies of the Knights-errant'...*

*...Now, as for the knights-errant, though their actions were not in accordance with the rules of propriety, they always meant what they said, always accomplished what they set out to do, and always fulfilled their promises. They rushed to the aid of other men 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 their ability and would have been ashamed to brag of their benevolence.* (Liu, 1979: 14-15)

From the above paragraphs, it is easily understood that the author has such sympathy and high esteem towards the knights-errant, and he likes to make known to other people how important these people are to the society. To justify the existence of the knights-errant and their principles, Sima added, “*if we expect accomplishment in one’s doing and honesty in one’s saying, how can one do without the fundamentals of knight-errantry?*” (Sima Qian 司馬遷, 2010: 2414)

After this, Sima Qian started to describe the lives of Zhu Jia, Ju Meng, and Guo Xie, respectively. Zhu Jia lived during the reign of the first emperor of Han dynasty (Han Gaozu 漢高祖, 206-193 B.C.). He was known as the person who helped many people, sheltered them or saved their lives. And yet he never showed off his benevolence, and refused to receive any reward or expression of gratitude from others. Ju Meng was a native of Luoyang. He was described to have similar characteristic to Zhu Jia, except for the fondness in gambling and other games that were the youths’ favourite. When his mother died, there were nearly a thousand carriages from far

away came to attend the funeral. This shows how Ju Meng was much loved and respected by many.

Both Zhu Jia and Ju Meng are depicted as penniless heroes. They helped other people without considering the basic needs of themselves, as Sima wrote that Zhu Jia *“liked to help the poor first, while his family had no money to spare, his clothes were ragged and old, and he only had a simple and tasteless meal”* (Sima Qian, 2010: 2415), and *“by the time Ju Meng was dead, his family barely even had ten pieces of gold to spare.”* (Sima Qian, 2010: 2415) The fact that they thought of other people's happiness and wellbeing first has proved that they were truly generous and selfless.

The next one is Guo Xie, who is best known for his upright and honest act. This is how he is portrayed in *Shiji*:

*Guo Xie was a native of Zhi. His grandfather was an expert in physiognomy. His father was a knight-errant who was executed by the Emperor Han Wendi. Guo had a small physique, yet obtuse and brave, and he drank no wine. When he was younger, he was a hot-tempered man, and killed many people whenever he got angry. He was willing to risk his own life to help his friends, offered convicts a hiding place, illegally made his own money, sometimes even robbed tombs. His*

crimes were countless, but he somehow managed to escape or was pardoned. As he grew older, he became very modest and kind. He helped other people without expecting them to repay him. Many young men who admired him even avenged for him without his knowing.

Once, his sister's son used his uncle's authority and forced a man to drink beyond his capacity. That man was angry, killed Guo's nephew and ran away. His sister was so furious that she demanded Guo to look for the killer. She said, "You must take care of this for me. Someone has killed my son, but the scoundrel hasn't been caught yet." She left her son's body in the middle of the road and refused to bury it, hoping to put a shame on Guo Xie. Guo sent a man to look into his nephew's murder. Out of desperation, the killer finally told him what had actually happened. Guo said, "It's all right that you killed my nephew, this was entirely his fault." Guo then released the man, and admitted the one who did wrong was his own nephew. He went to collect his nephew's body and buried it. Anyone who heard this story all praised him for

*being just, and trusted him more.* (Sima Qian, 2010: 2416)

The story of Guo Xie proves that a true knight-errant would not let anything disrupt their utmost principles and what should be done rightly. Guo Xie, as a powerful knight-errant as he was, fully abandoned his personal feelings when judging whether he should kill his nephew's murderer. Although he felt awkward at first (by his sister's forceful request), he decided to let the man go when he found out the truth. The honourable act of Guo Xie has set a standard for any knight-errant in later period as well.

The heroism of the knight-errant can usually be judged by their courage and altruism. An American folklorist Joseph Campbell has stated in his book: "*A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself*"; and "*...the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life.*" (Campbell with Moyers, 1988: 151-152) Campbell then continued to explain how a hero would take off on a series of adventures, in order to '*recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir.*' He said that these adventures are the rituals a hero has to undergo to achieve a psychological transformation, and to become more mature when the journey ends.

While a hero according to Campbell looks like a complex, or even spiritual, idea, the Chinese knights-errant's disposition is much simpler and more straightforward than that. The major commitment of the knights-errant is more of a physical act than the psychological one. Sima Qian wrote that the knights-errant *"rushed to the aid of other men 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 their ability and would have been ashamed to brag of their benevolence."* If the mission of a hero is to help people without hesitation or any concern about his or her life's safety, but to serve a much higher concept than life, to show selflessness and bigger heart, then we can definitely put the knights-errant to the category of 'heroes' like what Joseph Campbell has stated above.

## 2.2 The Assassins in *Shiji*

While the knights-errant in general are highly revered by a lot of people, the assassins, in the other hand, are somewhat arguably less majestic. Many people like to compare the knights-errant to the assassins in many levels and aspects. From the outside, they are similar in the appearance, as a particular group of people who work their way through the use of force and

weaponry. But on the inside, they are still different in essential elements, the generic types of comparison are:

1) The knights-errant only draw their swords to save innocent people from injustice, but killing is not always necessary, and they definitely do not take any wages in return. While the assassins purposely kill by order, most of them are professional killers, so they take money as payment for each killing.

2) Morality is a must-have quality for the knights-errant, while assassins don't necessarily have it.

3) Assassins' motivation can be politics-related, or it could be merely personal grudges, while the knights-errant do not take anything personally, they perform chivalrous deeds only to serve the altruism and justice.

The above arguments are commonly found when speaking of knights-errant and assassins in general. But they are not necessarily true, for there are many assassins who were respected and glorified by a lot of people, especially the ones mentioned in *Cike Liezhuan*. In addition, whether it was the knight-errant or the assassin, in the eyes of Chinese people, both groups possessed a special set of skills and performed the acts of chivalry, and consequently were treated as heroes nonetheless.

The 86<sup>th</sup> volume in *Shiji*, *Cike Liezhuan* or the 'Biographies of the Assassins', is an anthological record of

the assassins in Chinese history, especially during the Warring States and Han periods. It illustrates the lives of Cao Mo (曹沫), Zhuan Zhu (專諸), Yu Rang (豫讓), Nie Zheng (聶政), and Jing Ke (荊軻), who probably was the most well-known of them all.

Cao Mo was formerly a general of the State of Lu, but Lu army under his command has lost to the state of Qi three times. Afterwards there was a meeting between Qi Huan Gong (齊桓公, Duke Huan of Qi) and Lu Zhuang Gong (魯莊公, Duke Zhuang of Lu). At the altar where the meeting was held, Cao suddenly put a dagger against Qi Huan Gong, forcing him to return Lu territory that was lost in the battle. Qi Huan Gong had no choice but agreed to do so. This is somehow interesting because Cao Mo then became a ‘hero’ for winning the land back, and no one would ever mention that it was he who lost the battle in the first place.

Zhuan Zhu was an assassin hired by Prince Guang of Wu (吳公子光) to murder King Liao of Wu (吳王僚). Zhuan Zhu successfully killed the King in a party, where he hid a dagger in a fish. But after this, he was also killed.

Yu Rang, an assassin of the state of Jin, was renowned for his repeated attempts in killing Zhao Xiangzi (趙襄子) to avenge for his former lord Zhi Bo (智伯). The first time he changed his identity and planned to murder

Zhao Xiangzi in the toilet, where he was caught before doing so. However, Zhao Xiangzi did not kill him but let him go. After that, he covered himself in lacquer to hide his former looks, swallowed charcoal to make his voice coarser, and became a beggar in the market. His friend, upon seeing this, tried to persuade him otherwise, but he insisted on his plan, saying to give up the plan would mean giving up his loyalty to his master as well. Then Yu Rang tried to attack Zhao Xiangzi from under a bridge, but he failed once again and was arrested. Zhao Xiangzi recognised him despite his beggar appearance. Zhao Xiangzi asked Yu Rang why he kept doing this, and was moved by Yu Rang's faithfulness to his master. Yu Rang then requested to stab Zhao Xiangzi's robe instead to show his strong intention of revenge. Zhao Xiangzi gave him his robe, which Yu Rang stabbed three times before killing himself.

Another assassin in the Warring States period was Nie Zheng. Yan Zhongzi (嚴仲子) of Puyang had a dispute with Xia Lei (俠累) who was the prime minister of Han (韓). While Yan Zhongzi was looking for someone to kill Xia Lei, he heard about Nie Zheng's abilities and wanted to befriend him. After repeatedly refusing to see Yan Zhongzi, Nie Zheng eventually let him enter and have a drink. Yan Zhongzi then offered Nie Zheng a lot of gold,

but he refused to accept, saying “*I am fortunate enough to have an old mother with me. Although our family is poor and I am merely a dog butcher. But with this profession I am able to feed my family. Seeing that I can earn some to look after my mother, so I do not dare accepting your gift.*” (Sima Qian, 2010: 1964) Yan Zhongzi heard what he said and insisted no more. Some time later Nie Zheng’s mother died, he then regretted what he has spoken to Yan Zhongzi. So he travelled to see Yan Zhongzi and volunteered to take a revenge for him. Nie Zheng disguised a sword as a walking stick and entered the state of Han. Prime Minister Xia Lei was sitting in his office, guarded by a group of weapon-yielding men. Nie Zheng walked straight in, he stabbed and killed Xia Lei. Then there was a great commotion, where Nie Zheng killed dozens of more men. After that, Nie Zheng skinned his own face, gouged out his eyes, stabbed himself and pulled out his own intestines, and then he died.

Jing Ke was famous for his brave act of making his way into Qin palace to assassinate Qin Wang (秦王) or the King of Qin.<sup>6</sup> The mission was unsuccessful and Jing Ke was killed afterwards. However, people still praised Jing Ke for his braveness and a strong will to give up his own

---

<sup>6</sup> This refers to Ying Zheng (嬴政) who later became the Emperor of Qin, also the first emperor of China.

life as a martyr. The accounts of Jing Ke's mission are later used as source material in a film adaptation by the masterful director Chen Kaige (陳凱歌). The film *The Emperor and the Assassin* (荊軻刺秦王), released in 1998, is a fairly faithful adaptation of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of Qin Wang in *Shiji*. A film studies scholar Leon Hunt commented that Jing Ke “*is a human-scale hero—flawed, but brave enough to give his life up on a mission he wasn't entirely equal to. ...His heroism lies in his willing sacrifice and the suspension of his pacifism for a higher cause—even if he succeeds, he is not going to return.*” (Hunt, 2011: 67) The accounts of Jing Ke as portrayed in this film and *Shiji* have represented the idea of a ‘heroic sacrifice’. For this matter, Jing Ke is naturally and consequently honoured as an epitome of a historical hero.

From all the above stories about the historical assassins, it is evident that being labeled as an assassin does not make these people less worthy than the knights-errant. They, too, can be presented as fearless, brave, honest, and trustworthy men, who would not let anything ruin their principles. They were loyal to their master, and they kept promises they made with their friends. Are these matters not the qualities of the noble men?

### 3. *Shiji*'s influences on Chinese literature and film

Sima Qian's *Shiji* is not only influential to the studies of Chinese history, but it is also a huge contribution to the realm of Chinese literature. *Shiji* has been praised by scholars of every period of time for the conciseness of the text, the beauty in words of choice, and the vivid portrayal of many historical people. These spectacular qualities of its writing contain literary and aesthetic sense that is quite similar to the writing of fiction. (Zhang Xinke 張新科, 2010: 1-2) As a result, *Shiji* itself is commonly considered as both historical records and a work of literature. So it is not uncommon to see several works of Chinese literature in later periods would regard *Shiji* as the major source of their stories, or be heavily inspired by the writing style of Sima Qian. One of the apparent evidences is that many novels in later period would be named with 'zhuan' (傳) or 'ji' (記) in their title, (Zhang Xinke, 2010: 122) such as *Yingying Zhuan* (鶯鶯傳), *Li Wa Zhuan* (李娃傳), *Chang Hen Ge Zhuan* (長恨歌傳), *Gu Jing Ji* (古鏡記), *Li Hun Ji* (離魂記), and *Zhen Zhong Ji* (枕中記) in Tang dynasty, to name but a few. Both 'zhuan' and 'ji' come from the word *zhuanji* (傳記) which means biographies or records. Sima Qian wrote and categorised *Shiji* by the biographies of historical people, and it became a convention for a story title used

by many writers in later periods. Even the novels in Ming dynasty, such as *Shui Hu Zhuan* (水滸傳, Outlaws of the Marsh, or the Water Margin) or *Xi You Ji* (西遊記, Journey to the West), have also been influenced by this convention.

The stories of the knights-errant and assassins from *Shiji* are also the major source of creating the works of fiction, known as chivalric tales (俠義故事) or chivalric novels (俠義小說) which have stabilised themselves since the Tang period. The Tang novels, also known as Tang Chuanqi (唐傳奇), are considered as prototypes of Chinese novels. Written in classical Chinese, they are very short and concise, yet very self-contained, with a clear plot point and the vivid description of the characters. The images of the knights-errant in the novels are portrayed as either honourable heroes who save people from their distress, or the wise ones who enlighten or punish the arrogant scoundrels. The most popular chivalric novels in Tang period are *Qiuhanke Zhuan* (虬髯客傳), *Hongxian Zhuan* (紅綫傳), *Nie Yinniang* (聶隱娘), *Kunlun Nu* (昆侖奴), and *Xie Xiao'e Zhuan* (謝小娥傳). These novels' main characters mostly are the conventional knights-errant, except for *Nie Yinniang*, whose status is clearly an assassin.

Since the chivalric novels in Tang period, many of the knight-errant or *wuxia* characters in later works of

fiction seem to have inherited the heroic ideal from the ancient time. While the term *wuxia* has become a household genre in Chinese literature and other mediums, modern and contemporary *wuxia* novels, especially the works by Jin Yong (金庸) and Gu Long (古龍), have also become the source materials for *wuxia* films and television series. The *wuxia* film (武俠片) mainly refers to the martial arts action film (sometimes kung fu is included in this genre as well), with the sword-wielding knight-errant character as a protagonist.

At first, the *wuxia* films' popularisation was limited to the Chinese-speaking or Chinese-descendant audience only. Until the year 2000 that the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龍 in Chinese) became an international hit. Its oriental exoticism has drawn attention from the western world immensely. The film, based on the novel by Wang Dulu (王度廬)<sup>7</sup> and directed by Ang Lee (李安), is a *wuxia* romance about a stolen sword, a retiring master, and an arrogant yet impulsive young woman new to the *wuxia* world. It was well received worldwide and

---

<sup>7</sup> *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the fourth novel in the Crane-Iron series. This *wuxia*-romance series consists of five books, which are 1. *Crane Frightens Kunlun* (鶴驚崑崙) 2. *Precious Sword, Golden Hairpin* (寶劍金釵) 3. *Sword Force, Pearl Shine* (劍氣珠光) 4. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and 5. *Iron Knight, Silver Vase* (鐵騎銀瓶).

won so many accolades that it became a phenomenon for the Chinese-speaking film industry. The huge success of *Crouching Tiger* leads to many more productions of the big budget movies in the same genre, such as *Hero* (英雄, 2002), which is also about the assassination of Qin Wang, *House of Flying Daggers* (十面埋伏, 2004), both directed by Zhang Yimou (張藝謀), and recently *The Assassin* (刺客聶隱娘, 2015) directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢).

The *wuxia* characters in the novels and films mentioned above are considered ‘heroes’, not because of their superpowers but their courageous actions, their concern about other people’s lives and social unrests, some of them are even willing to sacrifice themselves for a higher cause. These notions about the heroism of the knights-errant and the assassins can clearly be related to the idea pitched by Sima Qian more than two thousand years ago in *Shiji*, and this very idea still remains imprinted on Chinese people’s minds to the present day.

## Conclusion

The stories of a hero in any culture are classic, timeless, and inspiring. A lot of people would love to look into the national history or even local myths, to find out what defines a ‘true hero’. The Chinese-style heroism is presented through a myriad of historical accounts on the

lives and acts of the knights-errant and assassins. Being one of the most trustworthy historical records of China, Sima Qian's *Shiji* has provided various and numerous narratives of these special and interesting groups of people, who are subsequently promoted as idealistic figures in popular media. I hope this article can show you the other side of the so-called 'Chinese heroes' and their contributions to the history of China.

### References:

#### English

- Campbell, Joseph, with Bill Moyers. 1988. **The power of myth**. Betty Sue Flowers, editor. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hunt, Leon. 2011. "Heroic chivalry, heroic sacrifice: 'martial arthouse' as epic cinema", in **The epic film in world culture**, edited by Robert Burgoyne. London and New York: Routledge.
- Liu, James J. Y. 1979. **The Chinese knight-errant**. Taipei: Southern Materials Center, Inc.
- Teo, Stephen. 2009. **Chinese martial arts cinema: the wuxia tradition**. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

#### Chinese

- Ban Gu 班固. 2010. **Hanshu 漢書**. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

- Cui Fengyuan 崔奉源. 1986. *Zhongguo gudian duanpian xiayi xiaoshuo yanjiu* 中國古典短篇俠義小說研究. Taipei: Lianjing Chubanshe.
- Peng Wei 彭衛. 2013. *Youxia yu Handai shehui* 遊俠與漢代社會. Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe.
- Sima Qian. 司馬遷. 2010. *Shiji* 史記. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Wang Qi 王齊. 1997. *Zhongguo gudai de youxia* 中國古代的遊俠. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- Weng Lixue 翁麗雪. 1986. "Gudai xiashi de fengmao" "古代俠士的風貌", in *Wen Tzao Journal* 文藻學報, vol. 1. Kaohsiung: Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages.
- Zhang Xinke 張新科. 2010. *Shiji yu Zhongguo wenxue* 史記與中國文學. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- Zheng Tianting, and Tan Qixiang, eds 鄭天挺、譚其驤. 2000. *Zhongguo lishi dacidian* 中國歷史大辭典. Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe.