

# *The Sword Culture of Southern China in the East Zhou Dynasty*

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**Abstract:** In the East Zhou Dynasty in China, the “sword” was a practical weapon and an important cultural symbol in the Southern part of China. This article employs the method of literature review, starting from explaining the practical use of the sword and analyzing the cultural message conveyed by the Southern sword in the East Zhou Dynasty in China. The article explores the sword culture from three aspects: sword-making technology, legend and literature stories of swords, and the political and social culture behind swords, providing a cultural picture with multiple aspects. It was found that the southern sword in the East Zhou Dynasty not only reflected the wisdom of metallurgical craftsmen but also became an important element in legend stories and political and social conventions. The Southern sword represents Southern people’s natural worship, morality and prestige of rulers, and the good quality and spirits of humanity. These swords were also the symbol of royal members’ political power and high status, the identity and capability of aristocracy, and the gratitude or respect between people.

**Keywords:** Sword Culture, East Zhou Dynasty, Sword Making, Sword Legends

## 1. Introduction

Though modern firearms have replaced cold weapons like swords, swords still survive today as a symbol of culture and history. In China, the sword is still an important element of Chinese classical culture such as traditional martial art. To better understand the sword culture legacy and keep the cultural heritage, it is necessary to study the sword and its culture in Chinese history. The sword became one of the major short weapons in the West Zhou Dynasty and gradually became a carrier of culture in the East Zhou Dynasty, especially in Southern areas. Thus, the culture of Southern swords in the East Zhou Dynasty is a pivotal research topic that cannot be neglected in the Chinese cold weapon study field. Many studies are focusing on different aspects of the sword culture in the East Zhou Dynasty. In Lionello Lanciotti’s article *Sword Casting and Related Legends in China*, the author discussed different versions of legends stories about two famous sword makers, Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh. In the article *Weapons of Kings: A New Perspective on Southern Sword Legends in Early China* by Olivia Milburn, the author discussed the relationship between imperial power and swords based on legend stories and archaeological evidence. However, few studies are exploring multiple aspects of the sword culture. The sword was not only a practical weapon during that period, but a representation of legends, kingship, and rituals. This project will analyze the practical function and

the cultural and social significance of swords in the Southern part of China in the East Zhou Dynasty. The first part of the paper will use the Sword of Goujian as an example to do a formal analysis to introduce southern swords. the second part of the article will explore the technology of sword-making, literature and legend stories, and the political and social culture indicated by swords in the East Zhou Dynasty. The final part will conclude the sword culture of Southern China in the East Zhou Dynasty and provide the direction for future study. The article will use the method of literature review, referring to primary sources and previous academic articles and books. This study will give people a special angle to explore the society and culture of the East Zhou Dynasty, promoting people's understanding of metallurgical technology, legend tales, politics, and society of early China. This paper can also help people learn more about sword culture or other weapon-related cultures, such as martial arts, in different periods of China.

## 2. Sword in the East Zhou Dynasty

According to the Analytical Dictionary of Characters, the sword (jian) is a type of weapon that evolved from the dagger. In Li Xi's Terms Explanation: Weapons Explanation, the author claims that the sword is a weapon with a straight spine and double spines used to defend oneself. According to Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian, in the war between Zhou and Shang (around 1046 BCE), the sword already become a weapon used in the army.

Most swords in the East Zhou Dynasty were made of bronze. One famous example is the Sword of Goujian excavated from Jingzhou, Hubei, which is currently in the Hubei Museum. The sword of Goujian is a bronze sword with a round disc pommel, cylindrical hilt, and a blade that became increasingly narrower till the top of the point. Except for the edge, the blade was decorated with black rhombus patterns. The rain guard was inlaid with blue glaze and green kallaite. The inscription on the lower blade writes: "The sword for Yue King Gou Jian personal use". Though it was made in the late Spring-autumn Period (770-476 BCE), the sword was still sharp.

In the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the sword not only played an important role in the war but also showed the cultural significance of kingship and spirit praised by Chinese people. This article will focus on swords from Southern China in the East Zhou Dynasty, analyzing both the practical use and the cultural connotation of swords.

## 3. Practical Use and Sword-making Technology

Bronze swords in the Southern part of China in the East Zhou Dynasty show the advanced bronze-making technology.

Firstly, sword craftsmen already owned the skill of adjusting the ratio of different types of metal elements. Kaogong Ji, the record of craft and technology in the Zhanguo Period, points out: "Divide the metal into three parts and tin takes up one part, which is called the metal ratio technology of making swords". Modern scientific research shows that the ratio of tin is usually between 11%-14% in the bronze sword in the Spring-autumn period, but the ratio increased to 14%-19% in the Zhanguo Period, which improved the hardness of swords but lowered its ductility. The experiment indicates that 15% is the best in ratio for bronze swords to balance the hardness and ductility, which means the sword is hard enough to attack enemies with a low risk of breaking off. As the ratio of 15% corresponds with the ratio ranges in the Zhanguo Period, it demonstrates craftsmen in the late East Zhou Dynasty adjusted the ratio of tin to help swords be better applied to the increasing wars [1].

Secondly, artisans in the East Zhou Dynasty employed the complex technology of "bimetallic cast" maturely. According to the archaeological evidence of bronze swords in Wu and Yue regions in the East Zhou Dynasty, some bronze swords' sword spines and blades have different metal ratios. With the analysis of bimetallic bronze swords in the Shanghai Museum, the sword spines have lower tin

ratios (8%-14%) with a high copper ratio and therefore have better ductility, which improves the flexibility of swords used in war. In contrast, the sword blades have higher tin ratios (22.12%-24.15%) and thus have higher hardness, which helps soldiers attack enemies much more effectively. Similarly, the research on the Sword of Goujian also found that the sword blade contains more tins compared with the sword ridge [2]. Furthermore, to make sword ridges and blades fit with each other, people in the Wu and Yue regions designed tenons for sword ridges. As the sword ridge was made before the blade, the liquid metal of the sword blade will encase the tenons of sword ridges, perfectly fixing the bimetallic structure. This technology demonstrates the combination of bronze-making and mortise-and-tenon joints, reflecting the advanced sword-making technology during the East Zhou Dynasty [2].

In addition, the technologies of plating swords and producing natural patterns for swords were also mature in the East Zhou Dynasty. In the East Zhou Dynasty, many bronze swords were exquisitely plated with tin, which improved not only the swords' artistic value but also the swords' antiseptic and protection abilities. Also, through high technology, firing could produce natural patterns on the sword blade, which was one of the most important features of some famous swords. For example, Yuejue Shu records a description of the famous sword Chunjun: "...look at its pattern, shining like moving stars; look at its light, surging like water flooding out of pool...". It depicts the beautiful pattern on the blades and the special light reflected by these patterns, implying both the high technology and artistic achievement of sword-making in the East Zhou Dynasty [3].

Among swords of different Chinese areas in the East Zhou Dynasty, Southern swords, especially swords from Wu and Yue regions owned the best quality. As I mentioned above, the most bimetallic swords were produced in the Southern part of China. Also, Kaogong Ji mentioned that Wu and Yue have the most appropriate climate for making swords [4]. The central state text of the Zhanguo Period also highlights the high quality and great value of southern swords from Wu and Yue. Moreover, Zhanguo Ce, the historical record of the Zhanguo Period, also includes the description of fine blades of high-quality swords from the Wu and Yue regions [5]. Under such circumstances, the high sword-making technology and production ability laid the foundation for the development of sword culture in the Southern part of China.

#### 4. Literature and Legend Stories

Literature and Legend Stories are one of the most important sources for exploring the sword culture of the Southern part of China. These sword-related stories reflect the human aspirations and spirits represented by swords.

To begin with, the sword represents the culture of nature worship. According to the legend stories in Yuejue Shu, Goujian, the king of Yue, asked the famous swordsmith Ou Yezi to make five valuable swords: Zhanlu, Chunjun, Shengxie, Yuchang, and Juque. Then a famous sword connoisseur describes the process of making Chunjun: "When making this sword, Chijin Mountain broke and shew tins, Ruoye River dried and shew copper, the Rain God creates downpour, the Thunder God made a great sound, flood dragon held the furnace, God set up charcoal, Taiyi came to the earth to watch, Tianjing also came". Also, according to the Spring-and-Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue, when famous swordsmith Ganjiang and his wife Moxie cast swords, they "mined the iron essence from five great mountains and the copper essence from the universe; served heaven and earth, Yin and Yang were all in the light; hundreds of gods came to watch, the light and clear air fell". Moxie thought the birth of sacred objects required humans, so she cut her hair and fingernails, throwing them into the furnace [6]. Hair and fingernails are regarded as an important part of the human body in the East Zhou Dynasty and therefore as sacrifice objects in rituals. Another story indicates that Moxie sacrificed herself to make the sword [7]. These records from Yuejue Shu and Spring-and-Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue indicate that the Yue people regard a good sword as the creation of nature and god,

which even requires the sacrifice of human beings. It explains why Southern people esteem and worship good swords from another angle.

Furthermore, the sword was the symbol of the ruler's kingship and prestige. Spring-and-Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue records a story about the famous sword Zhanlu cast by Ou Yezi. When Chu Zhao King, a king of Chu country, woke up one day and found a sword near his pillow. An official of Chu, Fenghuizi, told Chu Zhao King that the sword was called Zhanlu, a sword made out of the power of nature. He said: "(According to famous sword connoisseur Xue Zhu)..... if the ruler could control it by using his prestige, it can help him fight and defeat enemies. However, if the ruler did something against the reason, the sword would leave, leaving the ruler without the Way of Rule and finding the ruler with the Way (Dao). Wu King Lv He lost his morality, killing people (to bury them with his daughter) and planning to conquer Chu. Therefore, Zhanlu came to Chu" [6]. Similarly, in Yuejue Shu, another story about Chu King was recorded. In the story, Jin, another country in the East Zhou Dynasty, had sieged Chu for three years and Chu was in shortage of food and weapons. Thus, the king of Chu took his famous sword Tai'e Sword, climbing upon the city wall and waving Tai'e Sword. Then, the army of Jin was defeated, soldiers were confused, the blood flowed to thousand miles, animals ran and were shocked, rivers surged, and the king of Jin was covered with white hair. The king of Chu was very happy, asking if it was the sword's power or his power. Fenghuizi answered: "The power of the sword is due to your majesty's super ability" [8]. Both stories about the king of Chu show the correspondence between the good quality of the king and swords. On the one hand, good swords have their own souls, which leads them to find a king with high morality; on the other hand, only a king with great prestige can manage the swords and trigger swords' power.

Last but not least, swords also represent the invaluable spirit and quality of people. One article in Zhuangzi, a famous collection of prose works from the East Zhou Dynasty, states that those who own swords from Wu and Yue keep the swords in the boxes; they don't use swords casually because the swords are very valuable. The whole article claims the importance of honing oneself and preserving good spirits instead of flaunting oneself. The sword in the article symbolizes the great quality of humans and the behavior of keeping swords in a box represents the spirit of preserving (Shou) [8]. Spring-and-Autumn Annals of Lv Buwei also contain a story related to southern swords. The tale is about a person named Cifei, who got a Southern sword in Gansui. When he crossed the river with other people, two dragons appeared and wanted to kill people in the boat. Cifei said: "I am but decaying meat and rotting bones in the middle of the river. However, handing over my sword to save myself is something that I cannot do!" Then he jumped and killed two dragons with the swords, saving the all passengers on the boat. In this story, Cifei describes himself as decaying meat and regards the sword as a more valuable and important thing, which shows a contrast between the body and spirits: the body is mortal, but the sword and the spirit of fighting and saving people are immortal and invaluable [5].

## 5. Political and Social Culture

Swords also play an important role in political and social events. Swords are not the symbol of identity, but also the aspiration of people.

Firstly, swords are the symbol of political and military power for imperial houses. Many excavated swords from Wu and Yue in the East Zhou Dynasty have the inscription of "X King made Y weapon for personal use", such as the Sword of Goujian I mentioned above. A sword discovered in Anhui even indicates the special use of the sword: "King Guang of the Gongwu people made this sword for his personal use, to do battle with Yue". These swords show the king and imperial family's special political identity and their power over the sword production market. As to battle with Yue, one sword can't change the military power of the country. Thus, it is more like a symbol that helped King Guang to claim his military power and the aspiration to conquer Yue [5].

Secondly, swords also represent wealth or status. For royal families, swords as royal grave goods symbolize the imperial house's high status and wealth. According to historical records, the King of Wu, Helu, was buried with the famous sword Yuchang, and the daughter of Helu was buried with a fine sword named Panying. The excavation in 2007 discovered an aristocracy tomb in Hongshan, but no swords were found in the tomb. Scholars surmise that only kings and royal members in Wu and Yue areas can use swords as buried objects, which shows the wealth and status of royal identity [5].

For the aristocracy, the custom of wearing swords represents their status and skills. Shuoyuan-Shanshuo records the ceremony of conferring titles of nobility: "When Xiangchen Jun was conferred title of nobility, he wears green clothes, put the sword on...". According to the book Jiazi, only kings, dukes (zhuhou), and senior officials (dafu) can always wear swords, and civilians cannot wear swords if nothing special happens. Thus, wearing a sword is the identity information card of the aristocracy, representing their status [8][9]. Also, there was already the study of swordsmanship in the East Zhou Dynasty. Yuenv Teach Sword is a famous book of swordsmanship in the East Zhou Dynasty, which records the female sword master Yuenv's theory of swordsmanship. With the formation of swordsmanship culture, wearing swords also represent the aristocracy's high martial skills [6]. Meanwhile, as I mentioned in the literature and legend stories part, swords also symbolize the good quality and spirit of aristocracy.

Thirdly, swords were the vehicle of respect and gratitude between people. According to the Spring-and-Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue, Wu Zixu, a famous general and politician in the East Zhou Dynasty, gave the fisherman a valuable Seven-star Sword as a gift to appreciate the fisherman's help in carrying him across the river and sharing food with him. Similarly, in the political field, when renowned politician and philosopher Zigong came to Yue to persuade the king of Yue, Gou Jian, not to attack Ru, Gou Jian was very satisfied with Zigong's talk. Therefore, he gave Zigong a lot of gifts, including a valuable sword, but Zigong refused [10]. These stories reflect swords' important role as gifts of respect and gratitude in both daily and political circumstances.

## 6. Conclusion

This article explores the sword culture in the Southern part of China in the East Zhou Dynasty. In the East Zhou Dynasty, with the advanced sword-making technology, the Southern part of China developed its special and profound sword culture. The southern sword in the East Zhou Dynasty not only reflects the wisdom of metallurgical craftsmen but also became an important element in legend stories and political and social conventions. The Southern sword represents Southern people's natural worship, morality, and prestige of rulers, and the good quality and spirits of humanity. These swords were also the symbol of royal members' political power and high status, the identity and capability of aristocracy, and the gratitude or respect between people. Through southern swords, many different aspects of Southern areas of China in the East Zhou Dynasty are reflected and explored.

Because this study focuses on a general whole picture of Southern sword culture in the East Zhou Dynasty, each section did not provide sufficient details and evidence for small points. Therefore, the future study can focus on one field and explore it more deeply. Also, as sword culture still plays an important role in modern China, it will be an inspiring choice to explore more about the relationship between ancient Chinese sword culture of different periods and modern sword culture.

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