

A Study on the History, Literature and Associated Martial Arts Culture of the Chinese Long-Handled Axe

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The axe was one of the tools of production invented in prehistoric times, which played an important role in hunting and production. However, in the Neolithic Age, the size of tribes became much larger. Thus, the fight between humans and nature gradually turned into humans and humans. War, which was a means to fight for resources, developed, and the stone axe gradually appeared on the stage of history as a weapon. As the improvement of technology, the materials used to make axes also changed to copper and iron. The axe, which took shape in later generations, generally consists of four parts: the blade, the socket, the handle, and the ferrule. If we classify it according to the length of the handle, it can be divided into two types: long-handled axes and short-handled axes. The short-handled axe, which has various ways to use, can be wielded either as a pair or single, and it was often used in infantry combats. Although the short-handled axe and the long-handled axe have different functions, their forms and structures are closely related to each other. There were many different cold weapons in Ancient China. However, the axe was never the most impressive type, whether in novels or actual combat. But it was once a symbol of royal power, which was also a pillar of the country. What kind of historical code is hidden behind this huge contrast? This paper aims to reflect the evolution of ancient China's military, technology, and culture over thousands of years through discussing the changing role and status of the long-handled axe as a weapon in war history, as well as its significance in Chinese martial arts and war culture.

Keywords: Long-Handle Axe, War History, Classical Chinese Novels, Martial Arts Culture

Axes and Yue in the Shang (1600 B.C.-1046 B.C.) and Zhou (1046 B.C.-256 B.C.) Dynasties: Tools for Production and Weapons for Fighting or Symbols of Power and Authority

The blade of the Yue is curved, which looks like a crescent moon, and it is similar in shape to the long-handled axe. Besides, axes and Yue are often mentioned together in ancient Chinese historical documents, so we have to talk about the Yue first if we want to discuss the long-handled axe. Yue, which is also known by its ancient character form, was added a metal radical later because people in later periods usually made it with metal materials. In the Neolithic Age, the shapes and styles of axes and Yue were almost the same. There is still an argument about whether the Yue was ever used as a tool of production, while the axe is regarded as a tool of production that had relatively strong attacking functions. As wars developed and the trend of specialized weapons became obvious, whether an axe was drilled with holes or not became an important feature that told whether it

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was a weapon or a production tool. In fact, it is not rare across the world that people turned production tools into weapons, and the forks and rakes in China, sickles and flails in the West, as well as Karambit in Southeast Asia are all typical examples of this phenomenon.

From the late Neolithic Age to the Shang Dynasty, as tribes kept developing and the population grew steadily, the pattern of war also changed, shifting from long-distance battles to close-quarters fights. Since close-quarters combat was lethal, the long-handled axe became a powerful standard offensive weapon in the armies of this era. The Shang Dynasty was the peak of the Bronze Age, when bronze axes and battle-axes replaced the stone ones. As a result, the long-handled axe turned into the main offensive weapon equipped for infantry soldiers. The long-handled axe, which took slashing as its core fighting method, could inflict sufficient damage on enemies in hand-to-hand combat. The change in war forms made the defensive role of bows and arrows gradually replace their offensive role, which made the long-handled axe a decisive force on the battlefield. As for other long-handled weapons, spears, which mainly launched thrusting attacks, were more commonly used in military formations, but they did not have the power of long-handled axes and their battlefield functions did not fully overlap with those long-handled axes. Cavalry did not initially take shape until Emperor Wuling (?-295 B.C.) of Zhao (403 B.C.-222 B.C.) promoted the reform of “Hu-style clothing and mounted archery” in the Warring States Period. On battlefields before this period, especially in the Shang Dynasty, combats were mainly close hand-to-hand fights, which did not require high flexibility of weapons, and long swords still needed to be improved at that time. Therefore, the long-handled axe, which originated early and had relatively mature manufacturing techniques in actual combat, was obviously irreplaceable. This period was also the first peak era for the Chinese-style long-handled axe to serve as a practical combat weapon.



Figure 1. Bronze Yue from the Tomb of Fu Hao (Sources: adapting from Wei, 2011, p. 14).

From the late Shang Dynasty to the Zhou Dynasty, it was the so-called “Chariot Warfare Era”, when battles were mainly conducted by chariots. In this period, the battle-axe, which was not flexible enough and had other shortcomings, was no suitable for actual combat. Its symbolic meaning gradually took the place of its practical

function, and it existed more as a ritual vessel (as shown in Figure 1) (Wei, 2011, p. 14) and an instrument of punishment. Both axes and battle-axes were used as ceremonial weapons in ancient China, while the battle-axe was more often seen as a symbol of royal and military authority, and the axe had a relatively greater practical value in wars. But this does not alter the fact that both of them were symbols of ritual implements and power. The Chinese character “Wang”, which means “king”, gradually evolved from the shape of the axe and battle-axe. The bronze axes and battle-axes of this period, which are generally unearthed from large-scale tombs, can also support the viewpoint mentioned above.

The Song Dynasty (960-1279): The Revival of the Long-Handled Axe as a Practical Combat Weapon

Before the Song Dynasty, the range of weapons became wider due to the improvement of iron smelting technology and the transformation of combat styles. After the Warring States Period, the further development of iron smelting techniques laid the material foundation for the diversification of weapons, which allowed more types of weapons to emerge. As wars kept evolving, infantry troops separated from chariots and turned into an independently organized military unit. The intensity of wars was constantly rising, which also made the duration of wars much longer than before. Because of these reasons, weapons for individual soldiers developed towards a more specialized direction. However, the long-handled axe, which was rather unwieldy by nature, lost a great deal of its practical combat value compared with the time of the Shang Dynasty. As a result, this long weapon was no longer seen on the battlefields throughout China for a very long time.

During the late Tang Dynasty (836-907) and the Five Dynasties period (907-960), the quality of armor was getting better and better. This change brought about a new requirement for infantry weapons, which needed to have the ability to break through heavy armor. Therefore, in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) that followed the Five Dynasties and Ten states period (902-979), the long-handled axe, which served as a real combat weapon, entered its second and final golden age. The heavy infantry of the Song army usually relied on long-handled axes to resist the attacks of cavalry. The following text will explain this weapon from three perspectives, including what the long-handled axe of this era was, how it was used in battles, and the exact reasons why it could make a revival in the Song Dynasty.

The Pictorial Documentation of Long-Handled Axe Designs

During the Northern Song Dynasty, the patterns of long-handled axes were recorded in a military work named *Wujing Zongyao*. *Wujing Zongyao* was an official military book compiled by Ding Du (990-1053), Zeng Gongliang (999-1078), and other scholars under the order of Emperor Renzong (1010-1063) of the Song Dynasty, which is divided into two parts, including the former collection and the latter one with a total of 20 volumes. Why to compile this military book? The Song army suffered three successive defeats in the wars against the Western Xia (1038-1227) at that time. Therefore, the emperor and his ministers of the Northern Song Dynasty compiled this book, which intended to help generals master military knowledge and solve the problem of “long-standing military weakness” in the Song Dynasty.

Figure 2 shows the pattern of the large axe in the Song Dynasty, which has the same structure as an ordinary long-handled axe. According to the records in *Wujing Zongyao*: Large Axe has a blade and a long wooden handle, owning many different names such as Kai Shan, Jing Yan, Ri Hua, Wu Di, and Chang Ke. These are the axes with the same appearance.

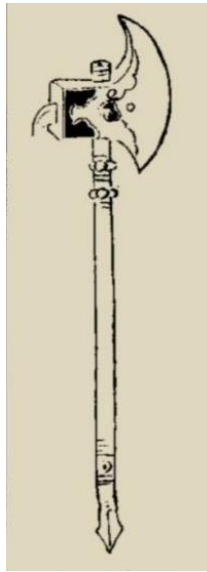


Figure 2. Large long-handled axe in *Wujing Zongyao* (Sources: adapting from Ding&Zeng, 1999, p. 1084).

The significance of recording the long-handled axes in official illustrations has two main points. First of all, it means that the Northern Song Dynasty paid great attention to the development of weapons and promoted their standardization, since the long-handled axe was recognized as the official weapon of the Song army and the government had unified the rules for its shape and size. This allowed the long-handled axes to be made in a standardized way and provided to infantry soldiers, which marked that the weapon had changed from a tool only for individual generals to an important part of the national military forces. Secondly, this shows the specialization of weapon functions, which was a sign of the progress in military technology during the Song Dynasty. The long-handled axe was not a common weapon that could be used in every kind of war, but a tool that was designed for specific combat tasks. The inclusion of this kind of specialized weapon in the official military book also means that the Song Dynasty had a very deep understanding of weapon research.

Application of the Long-Handled Axe in Anti-cavalry Warfare by the Infantry of the Song Dynasty

Infantrymen of the Northern Song Dynasty were already trained to fight with large axes, but if we focus on the real combats, we should refer to the wars between the Song and Jin dynasties (1115-1234). Wanyan Zongbi (?-1148), a famous general of the Jin Dynasty, once said, “Among the Weapons employed by the Song army, the most excellent one is the Shenbi Bow (a kind of crossbow), and the second one is the heavy axe; there are no other weapons we need to fear” (Li, 2013, p. 2916). The long-handled axe won such high recognition from the enemies of the Song infantry, which fully proves its remarkable achievements in actual battles during the Southern Song Dynasty. Therefore, if we intend to make an in-depth study of the function of the long-handled axe, we have to consult “The History of the Song Dynasty” and “The History of the Jin Dynasty”. We will find that the method in which the Song infantry used the long-handled axe was greatly different from the Shang Dynasty. Axes in this period were mainly used to attack and defend cities, or to hack at enemy cavalry. In addition to long-handled large axes, the Song army was also equipped with short-handled axes like the “Eyebrow Axe”, “Phoenix Head Axe”, and “File Axe” (Ding & Zeng, 2017). The “Eyebrow Axe” was often used to dig tunnels when attacking cities, while the “File Axe” was used to defend cities when enemy were approaching the city gates. The long-handled axe, however, was frequently used by the Song infantry in anti-cavalry operations.

Cavalry had greater mobility than infantry, and the Central Plains was a vast and flat area. This kind of open plain terrain was very beneficial for the cavalry of northern nomadic peoples, who marched south to launch attacks against the Song Dynasty. Generally speaking, the core strategy of the Song infantry in fighting against cavalry was like this: Axemen were covered by soldiers such as spearmen and crossbowmen, and they would step forward to kill the enemy and their horses as soon as the enemy's elite heavy cavalry showed up. In fact, this was a flexible tactical idea, which had a variety of practical applications.

Specific examples of this tactic are recorded in historical books such as *Chronicle of Events Since the Jianyan Reign* and *Biography of Liu Qi in The History of the Song Dynasty*. The Battle of Shunchang was an important defensive war in which the Song army defeated a stronger enemy with fewer troops. This war was commanded by Liu Qi (1098-1162), who first used long-range weapons like the Shenbi Crossbow together with chariots to attack the enemy's formation. At that time, crossbows and bows mainly played a role in defending the city, which achieved the strategic goal of causing effective casualties and forcing the Jin cavalry to retreat. Later, Liu Qi made use of the disadvantage that the Jin army was not used to the southern climate after marching south. He ordered the infantry to leave the city at the hot noon, asking soldiers to use long spears to stab the enemy and protect the axemen first, and then use heavy axes to break the enemy's armor, which finally repelled the Jin army. (Toqta, 2011, pp. 11401-11403) Han Shizhong (1090-1151), who lived in the same era, was one of the Four Generals of the Restoration. The Beiwei Army he founded took hemp-wrapped knives and heavy axes as their main weapons (Toqta, 2011, p. 11363). When fighting against the Jin cavalry, they formed a formation with long-handled axes, "advancing like a wall... winning every war and killing both the enemy soldiers and their horses" (Xu, 1987, p. 1569). In simple terms, these infantrymen formed a combat unit of five men, which advanced alternately and formed an airtight formation to reduce the combat effectiveness of the cavalry. This tactic that Han Shizhong used to fight against the Jin cavalry was successful and was finally popularized among the infantry of the Song army. We can believe that in the Southern Song Dynasty, the long-handled axe showed its value in anti-cavalry warfare through the coordinated combat of heavy infantry holding long-handled axes and other troops such as crossbowmen.



Figure 3. Axes shatter the iron pagodas (Sources: adapting from Zhiwen Fenghuo Studio, 2015, p. 140).

It is worth mentioning that the tactical idea of letting soldiers hold spears or bows to protect the axemen and allow them to attack and break the enemy's armor did not first appear in the anti-cavalry wars of the Song infantry in the Southern Song Dynasty. Similar tactics had already emerged as early as the reign of Emperor Zhenzong (968-1022) of the Song Dynasty, which were designed to settle the border troubles, even though they had not formed a stable combat pattern at that time.

In the repeated battles where the Song infantry fought against cavalry, the axes became increasingly specialized and unique in their functions, which gradually became a major trend. Besides, every soldier in the Beiwei Army held a huge long-handled axe to counter the enemy cavalry (Toqta, 2011, p. 11363), and their remarkable victories fully showed how effective the long-handled axe was in the tactics that the Song infantry used to defeat cavalry.

The Fundamental Reasons for the Resurgence of the Long-Handled Axe

From the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period to the era of Liao (916-1125), Song, Xia, and Jin Dynasties, the nomadic peoples in the north often used heavy cavalry whose soldiers and horses were all covered with armor to fight against the armies of the Han people's regimes, which was the essential reason why the long-handled axe became popular again (Jones, 1987).

Why do we say in this way? Because although the way of armoring both soldiers and horses greatly improved the defense ability of cavalry, it also brought huge physical consumption, which made heavy cavalry less mobile than other kinds of cavalry. Originally, the Song Dynasty could have learned from the early Tang Dynasty that used cavalry to defeat cavalry. However, the Song Dynasty did not have good lands for raising horses, so it was impossible to train a large number of cavalry, which forced the army to rely on infantry to fight against cavalry in wars. That is why the long-handled axe had the most practical value during the Song Dynasty.

Take the "Iron Pagodas" of the Jin army (as shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5) as an example. According to historical records, these cavalymen "all wore heavy armor, formed groups of three and were linked by leather ropes, which gave them the name of Iron Pagodas" (Yuwen, 1986, p. 161). Although there are different views on the exact title of this Jin cavalry and whether they really fought in groups of three that need further study, the Iron Pagodas were a typical kind of fully-armored cavalry where both riders and horses were protected by armor. We need to tell the concept of fully-armored cavalry apart from heavy cavalry. The standard to classify heavy cavalry is not whether they wear armor, but their fighting methods and tactics, which means cavalry that attacks by charging is heavy cavalry, while cavalry that fights by shooting is light cavalry. This classification rule actually comes from the book *The Art of War in the Western World*, which is not completely suitable for the military conditions in the East.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, the heavy infantry of the Han regimes during this period had to make their weapons heavier in order to fight against the nomadic cavalry. Therefore, in the armies of Han Dynasty which were represented by the Song Dynasty, heavy weapons such as long-handled axes, horse-slaying swords, and iron whips, which were very effective in breaking armor, became extremely popular.

As shown in Figures 4 and Figures 5, we can find that if we need to fight against the Jin cavalry which had a high level of armor protection, we could only hack at the unprotected arm joints and forearms of the cavalymen, as well as the unprotected lower legs of their war horses in the pictures. In actual combat, the infantry of the Song army used axes and swords to stab the enemy's chest above and slash the enemy's horse below (Li, 2013), which means that they attacked the vital chest part of the Jin cavalry and chopped at the legs of the war horses. Thus, it

can be seen that using long-handled axes to fight against the fully-armored cavalry with poor flexibility was a very suitable tactic.



Figure 4. Iron pagodas (Sources: adapting from Zhiwen Fenghuo Studio, 2015, p. 242).



Figure 5. Iron pagodas in combat (on the left) (Sources: adapting from Wei, 2011, p. 224).

Long-Handled Axes in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasties (1644-1912)—Their Twilight and Decline

The Ming and Qing Dynasties were a period when cold weapons and firearms coexisted on the battlefield, which led to another transformation in the form of warfare. Firearms gradually replaced cold weapons as the dominant tools in wars, so long-handled axes were no longer standard weapons that were equipped for the army on a large scale in this era, and both their status and functions had changed accordingly.

The Ming Dynasty: Long-Handled Axes as Weapons for Cavalry Combat

Long-handled axes became weapons for cavalry battles used by some valiant generals in the Ming Dynasty. According to the *History of the Ming Dynasty—Biography of Shi Heng*, Shi Biao (?-1460), who was the nephew of Shi Heng (?-1460), was a bold and battle-hardened general that was good at using axes (Zhang, 2000, p. 4617). It is clear that the application scenarios of long-handled axes in the Ming Dynasty were different from those in the Song Dynasty. They were not only used to attack cities and break through armor but also applied to cavalry combats. The reason behind this change was that although the use of firearms was gradually growing in the Ming Dynasty, cold weapons still maintained their status on the battlefield. In the early Ming Dynasty, nomadic ethnic groups in the north marched south to attack, and the enemies that the Ming infantry faced were somewhat similar to those that the Song infantry had dealt with. This was the reason why long-handled axes were preserved during this period.

All above show that during the Ming Dynasty, the long-handled axe was gradually change from a standard weapon for large infantry formations in the Song Dynasty to a personalized armament for cavalry officers. This phenomenon recorded the changing role of cold weapons, providing rich creative materials for many novels written in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

The Ming Dynasty: The Illustration of Long-Handled Axe Martial Arts

In *Wubei Yaolue* written by Cheng Ziyi (?-?), the martial arts skills of the long-handled axe in the Ming Dynasty were recorded in the form of illustrations, which is believed to be the only complete set of martial arts illustrations for the long-handled axe that has survived from ancient China.

This was a milestone event in the development history of the long-handled axe. As is recorded in *Wubei Yaolue*, the martial arts of the long-handled axe were passed down from Wang De (1087-1154), a famous general of the Song Dynasty, which mainly included a few moves such as hooking, chopping, wrapping, stirring, and splitting, together with other skills to defeat enemies (Cheng, 1998, p. 282). If we analyze the position where the warrior held the axe handle in Figures 6 and 7, we can find that the warrior's movements adopted a typical resistance lever, whose advantage was that the moves were bold and unrestrained in actual combat, so it could fully take advantage of the length of the long-handled axe to attack and defend. This inheritance and illustration of personal martial arts exactly indicated that the axe skills had shifted from military techniques that emphasized collective cooperation and coordination among different troops to a field that focused on individual bravery. Meanwhile, the illustration of the long-handled axe martial arts also stood for the progress of the research on ancient Chinese martial arts.



Figure 6. Axe-raising stance (Sources: adapting from Cheng, 1998, p. 282).



Figure 7. Axe-chopping stance (Sources: adapting from Cheng, 1998, p. 283).

The Long-Handle Axe in the Qing Dynasty: A Standard Cold Weapon for the Green Standard Army

In the Qing Dynasty, as firearms developed further, traditional cold weapons declined even more. The protective armor that soldiers wore in battles also changed with the upgrade of weapons, and cotton armor took the place of the traditional metal armor, which means that cold weapons had to make special adjustments accordingly. As a result, most traditional cold weapons began to fade away except for spears and swords. The axe, whose main functions were breaking armor and chopping enemies, could no longer give full play to its advantages on the battlefield, so it also declined gradually. However, we can still find records of many kinds of axes such as the Vanguard Right Wing Axe, Vanguard Left Wing Axe, and Green Standard Army Long-Handled Axe (as shown in Figure 8) in *Illustrated Regulations of the Imperial Ritual Objects*, which was compiled in the 24th year of the Qianlong (1711-1799) reign (Yun et al., 2004, p. 708; Yun et al., 2004, p. 732). The Green Standard Army was a local security force rather than the main combat troops, and the reason why they were equipped with long-handled axes was generally to play a deterrent role. All in all, the long-handled axe was reduced to a weapon used only for low-intensity conflicts during this period, which never regained its glorious status in the old days.

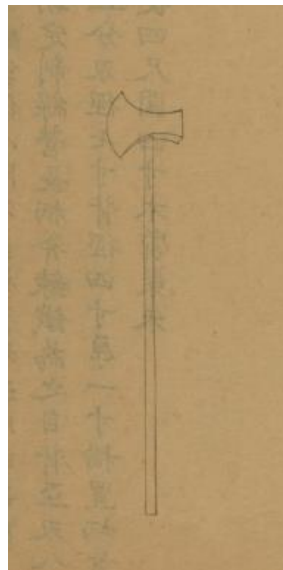


Figure 8. Green Standard Army Long-Handled Axe (Sources: adapting from Yun et al., 2004, p. 732).

Changing Perspective—The Application of the Image of the Long-Handled Axe in Chinese Classical Novels

The long-handled axe gradually fell into disuse in the wars during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, but it gained a new life as an important cultural symbol in classical novels, which became an indispensable image for creating specific characters.

The Reckless Warrior With an Axe: Taking the Axe as the Cavalry Weapon for Bold and Unrestrained Generals

In classical novels, weapons are often highly unified with the images of characters, and the spiritual temperament of the long-handled axe has also been preserved in classical literary works. The axe is often used to shape the bold and heroic images of warriors in ancient Chinese war novels. For instance, Suo Chao, who is called the “Daring Vanguard” in *Water Margin* (Figure 8), takes the gold-dipped axe as his iconic weapon (Shi & Luo, 1997, p. 167). If we expand to the image of axe weapons, Cheng Yaojin in *The Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties* (Figure 9) and his Eight Trigrams Xuanhua Axe (Zhong, 2017, p. 19) are also typical examples.

Cheng Yaojin’s “three axe strikes” are clumsy but extremely fierce, which is inseparable from his image as a reckless warrior general in the story. However, the historical prototype of Cheng Yaojin is quite different. According to historical records such as *Old Book of Tang* and *New Book of Tang*, Cheng Zhijie (589-665) (whose original name was Cheng Yaojin) in history was a general who was good at using cavalry lances (Liu, 1975; Ouyang, 1975). A lance is a heavy spear that was often used by cavalry from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) to the Tang Dynasty. This is an artistic transformation made for the aesthetic unity between characters and weapons. This combination stems from the long-term accumulation of folk aesthetic traditions, and finally becomes a stylized expression similar to the facial makeup in Peking Opera: Rough warriors are matched with heavy weapons, while elegant scholars hold light weapons. So the axe has become the standard equipment for the image of “reckless warrior” in literature.



Figure 9. Suo Chao (Source: adapting from Wang, 2017, p. 19).



Figure 10. Cheng Yaojin (Sources: adapting from Zhong, 2017, p. 36).



Figure 11. Li Kui (Source: adapting from Wang, 2017, p. 22).

Using Weapons to Symbolize Characters: Hints of Personality

Chinese classical novels have a long-standing tradition of shaping characters through their weapons, which are not just combat tools but also the external expression and extension of a character's inner personality. The fighting style of an axe is bold and unrestrained, as it combines both powerful hacking and slashing, which makes it a perfect symbol for the characteristics of fierceness, bravery, and straightforwardness. It is different from spears and lances, which are usually used to describe heroes who are loyal, brave, and flexible, and it is also different from swords, which often stand for loyal and righteous figures. Instead, the axe focuses on absolute power and suppression, so it is especially fit for creating those bold folk heroes who are not good at schemes but have extraordinary strength. For example, Li Kui in "Water Margin", who is well-known for his recklessness, always uses a pair of axes (Shi & Luo, 1997, p. 496). As we mentioned before, Su Chao's gold-dipped axe and Cheng Yaojin's Xuanhua axe both match the temperament, personality, and behavior of their owners perfectly.

This way of writing, which uses a weapon to represent a person, is an important feature of character creation in Chinese classical novels. It makes the characters vivid and their personalities more distinct with excellent literary skills. This also shows the common understanding of the cultural meanings of different weapons in ancient society, and it carries the folk aesthetic imagination of power and forthright personalities.

Conclusion: The Evolution of the Identity of the Long-Handled Axe in a Thousand Years of History

Looking back on thousands of years of history, the long-handled axe broke away from its original identity as a production tool and developed into a specialized weapon, which also turned into a symbol of royal authority and military power during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. In the Song Dynasty, this weapon was revitalized on the battlefield for a second time because it was used to resist the fully-armored cavalry (Jones, 1987), yet it gradually faded out of the battlefield in the Ming and Qing Dynasties as the fully-armored cavalry declined. Furthermore, the long-handled axe offered abundant creative materials for classical novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which gained eternal vitality under the pens of literary writers.

The transformation of the social identity of the long-handled axe was grounded not merely in social needs but more importantly in the reforms of the times. The change in the status of this weapon, in essence, mirrored the evolution of traditional Chinese cold weapons from the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age to the Firearm Age, and it also carried the memory of China's war history that came into being with the rise of civic culture and martial arts culture. The millennial evolution of the long-handled axe is exactly a vivid microcosm of how Chinese civilization has continuously adapted, developed, and reshaped itself in the fields of technology and culture.

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