

# An Introduction to Chinese Archery

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## **Abstract**

China is one of the earliest countries invented bow. At Shiyu site(峙峪遗址), a well known archeological site in Suoxian(朔县), a small county in Shanxi Province, lots of stone-made arrow heads unearthed during the excavation, have proven that bows were widely being used during the later period of the Paleolithic Age. Also, some ancient Chinese legends regard the invention of bows as the key symbol of origination of Chinese civilization.

As we all know, bows are not only the most powerful weapon in the cold weapon age, but also the most important production tool. In ancient China, follow the successive development of bows and archery, they were gradually endowed with many other meanings or sociological functions apart from its basic usage. They served as an education institution, a sport, a leisure activity, or a means to communicate, etc., all that inevitably extended the cultural meanings of Chinese archery. Consequently, certain etiquettes, ornaments, clothing, gifts, contests, examinations, and even literature that concern with archery were given birth. All these combine together, and generate out a wealthy and colorful cultural phenomenon, and develop into a special as well as rich and interesting field of study.

## **Archery Education**

During the Shang Dynasty (*From 18 century BC to 12 century BC*) and Zhou Dynasty (*From 12 century BC to 3 century BC*), especially West Zhou Dynasty (*the period before 771 BC*), archery as the most important lesson teaching at schools, was a required skill for all aristocrat men. Actually, schools then were usually called Yang(庠), Xu(序), Xue(学), Jiao(校), all names originally used for archery practices. These names are still being used today to refer schools. In West Zhou, only aristocrats have the privilege to take education. Through practicing in archery and its related etiquettes, those nobles not only gained the proficiency at the war skills, more importantly, they were also supposed to cultivate their minds and learn how to behave as nobles. As a result, almost all activities and conducts concerning with archery were elaborately designed and integrated into various ceremony activities, these ceremony activities together are called Lishe(礼射), including many forms, such as Dasheli, Yansheli, Xiangsheli, etc. They are the essential parts of Chinese Liyue(礼乐). In fact, to see from a different angle, Lishe, the institutionalized archery ceremony

can be seen both as an archery-oriented contest, and the demonstration of archery related etiquettes, within which contain the primary forms of Chinese thoughts in sports.

Coexisting with Lishe, there are also practical archery techniques in the military, civilian archery as leisure, and other paramilitary archery activities. Comparing to the ritual and gentle Lishe, these archery activities are called “Wushe” (武射), namely martial archery. They are judged by the thickness and accuracy their shootings can make at the leather made target, so they are also called “Guangezhishe” (贯革之射), namely, shooting of leather penetration. Wushe are obviously military activities, despite of the fact that there are also certain elements of competition in it, but they mainly concentrate on the actual effect, the strength of the bows and the distance of shoots.

### **The Educator Confucius & Archery**

The great educator Confucius (551 BC~479 BC) was the founder of private education in China; he challenged and broke the monopoly of education right originally held by aristocrats. He is also a zealous advocate of Sheli. He includes archery into his education system, as one of the six basic skills pupils should have to learn. He once said that

“Noble men have nothing to compete, if really have to, Let us compete in archery...and the archery contest should be decorous.”

Confucius himself was also a great toxophilite, regularly demonstrated his archery skills. He emphasizes the educational function of archery, so one of his famous phrases is “to look inside one’s moral through watching his archery skills.” (射以观德) He regards the archery training as the important means for people to learn etiquettes and the moral standards.

Because of the difference in archery players’ physical conditions, he raised the point of “Shebuzhupi” (射不主皮), means that reaching the target is not the single most important purpose of shoots. In Confucius’ s mind, the actual participation and the proper behaviors during the whole process are more important. Confucius’ s thoughts on archery generate a great influence upon the later development Chinese archery, especially on the various archery related physical activities, we can even see this as one of the most important reasons why ancient Chinese sports take the competitive element so lightly.

From of old, China is always a multinational country. The interactions, conflicts and fusions between various nationalities rising and falling constitute the basic impetus propelling the continuous development and flourishing of Chinese culture. This feature can be seen particularly clear in the development of Chinese national sports, among which Chinese archery is definitely a typical one.

### **Archery Categories**

In ancient China, archery techniques were divided into Han archery and Hu archery. Han archery means the original Chinese archery; Hu archery means the

archery techniques from other nationalities living in the west region of China. Also archery can be divided as ground archery and horse back archery. Furthermore, Chinese archery can be categorized according to the bow and arrow production, etiquette, related customs, and the contest rules. During ancient ages, Chinese regimes regularly held archery competitions with peripheral nationalities. Most of these competitions were proceeded between deliberately selected players, so they were also political and cultural events other than athletic competitions. These multinational interactions of archery technique were finally integrated during the Qing Dynasty, shaping out the complete and mature form of Chinese archery; it is a perfect amalgamation of multinational archery traditions and techniques, mainly originated from Han nationality and Hu nationalities. Thanks to the better official military examination system adapted by the Qing Dynasty, in which archery was one of the required exam items, Chinese archery finished its final formation and dissemination in public. In order to get an official post, many young people tried to study archery, and its rigorous discipline and physical requests fostered the birth of numerous archery schools and teachers. Local governments and rich people frequently held archery tests or even set bounty for people to compete in archery skills, they became the most popular sport culture phenomenon in the Qing Dynasty, and also these activities could be seen as a rude form of athletic games.

Because of the multinational interactions, and the cultural differences generated among various regions, Chinese archery also produced out some other archery related activities, such as crossbow, slingshot, Touhu, willow shooting, bow pulling, etc. Some of these games were nearly as old as the bow itself, such as slingshot. Some were born in Southern China, later brought to other regions of China, such as crossbow. Some were created by different nationalities other than Chinese and popular among nobles, such as willow shooting.

### **Chinese People & Archery**

A very important phenomenon is that, Chinese people really like archery, and the nation used it as an examination, and as a significant education institution. Many people composed books for Chinese archery, trying to summarize and spread the culture. There are more than one hundred kinds of Chinese archery books still remained today, they are the most valuable literature and reference for today's study in ancient Chinese sports (Ma, 2004). Also we have found out that these writings and books have produced unprecedentedly eminent impact upon the peripheral countries' archery tradition, especially Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Actually, during 1920s to 1950s, Chinese archery could still being seen on the Chinese sports stage. Unfortunately, since 1959, when China formally embraced international archery as an official sport in the national games, Chinese archery was gradually abandoned and finally fated out from our sights. Now most of the techniques and traditions of Chinese archery are lost, the sophisticated production of Chinese composite bows is holding its last breathe, a similar

destiny to almost all traditional Chinese sports (Ma & Yum, 2004) . Since 1982, China has been holding the National Minority Nationality Games regularly, and some national archery games are included. Though they are quite different to the traditional Chinese archery, still, this gives us a sigh of hope. Nonetheless some scholars have started studying and attempting to recover Chinese archery, we hope Chinese archery could one day re-appear in front of the world.

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