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From Ritual Vessel to Tool of War: The Social Life History of the Pre-Qin Bow and Arrow

1. Preface

The bow and arrow possessed an irreplaceable dual nature in pre-Qin society. They were both lethal weapons determining victory on the battlefield and central ritual objects signifying status and cultivating virtue in temples and rural communities. It seems like contradictory duality raises the core question this paper seeks to address: when a single technology possesses both the potential to destroy life and to educate the mind, how do different social orders define it, shape it, and mobilise it to achieve their own objectives? In other words, how does society “manage” its most fundamental form of violence?

This paper contends that the history of the bow and arrow in pre-Qin society vividly demonstrates two starkly contrasting models of power applied to the ‘management’ of a single technology. By meticulously examining the evolution of the bow and arrow across four dimensions—manufacturing standards, distribution and circulation, usage practices, and the social meanings ascribed to it—this study seeks to reveal: Pre-Qin society initially employed an exceptionally refined system of “ritual propriety” (li) to civilise and internalise necessary force, transforming it into an instrument for constructing internal harmony. Subsequently, amid profound social crisis and restructuring, it pivoted towards an efficient and ruthless system of “rules/technology” (fa/shu), “utilising”, “externalising”, and “maximising” that same force to serve as the bedrock for external competition and state survival. Traveling this evolution concerns not merely the rise and fall of a particular technique, but rather the complex and profound symbiotic relationship between political power, and material culture during the critical period of early state formation in China.

2. The Manufacture of Bows and Arrows

In the pre-Qin era, particularly during the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods, making a bow was far from mere artisan craftsmanship. It constituted a political process deeply intertwined with state authority and thoroughly permeated by the spirit of ritual propriety. The text *Zhouli: Kaogongji* provides an window into this process.

2.1 Production Monopoly and Knowledge Barriers

Firstly, the production system for bows and arrows was fully into the state administrative framework. According to the *Zhouli: Kaogongji*, ‘there were seven craftsmen specialising in woodworking,’¹

The wheelwrights fashioned wheels and wheel covers, the carriage-makers constructed the body of the chariot, the bowmakers produced six types of bows, the armourers crafted weapon handles, the builders were responsible for constructing palaces, city walls, and ditches, the chariot-makers assembled complete chariots, and the cabinetmakers produced drinking vessels and targets for archery ceremonies.²

constituting a significant category of official artisans under the jurisdiction of the *Dong guang si kong*. This meant that the manufacture of weapons of the highest calibre was an industry directly controlled by the state.

Crafting a bow of standard quality involved an exceedingly intricate process. It required the integration of six materials – wood, horn, sinew, glue, silk, and lacquer – and underwent dozens of procedures, including ‘bending the wood,’ ‘boiling the horn,’ and ‘treating the sinew.’—Strictly obtain the finest materials according to the seasons. Gan is harvested in winter (for its firmness), Jiao in autumn (for its rich resin), Silk and Qi in summer (for superior quality). Let the materials complement one another: Gan seeks distance, Jiao seeks swiftness, Jin seeks depth, Jiao seeks harmony, silk seeks solidity, Qi seeks weather resistance.³

The entire process could take years to complete. This extreme complexity and specialisation inherently formed a technical barrier. Through its monopoly on advanced manufacturing knowledge, the state ensured that the most sophisticated instruments of violence remained within the hands of the ruling class, thereby controlling the material foundations of armed forces at their very source.

2.2 Specifications, Decorations and Grades

More significantly, the bow's physical form itself bore the imprint of a serious hierarchical system. The making was not driven by the pursuit of ultimate performance, but rather by the imperative to conform to the norms of ritual propriety. The *Kaogongji* explicitly stipulated:

A bow measuring six feet and six inches in length is termed the superior specification, to be used by senior officials; a bow measuring six feet and three inches is termed the middle specification, to be used by middle-ranking officials; a bow measuring six feet is termed the inferior specification, to be used by junior officials.’ The bow's length

¹ Translated by myself. Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* (Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1245.

² Translated by myself. Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* (Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1246.

³ Translated by myself. Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* (Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1372-1373.

directly corresponded to the rank of its user, the ‘shi’.⁴

It meticulously detailed the form and dimensions of the “zao” and the naming conventions for bows of varying lengths.

This constituted a mandatory standard within the state's official craftsman system. It demonstrates that pre-Qin states exercised control over martial technology down to the millimetre level of artefacts. Simultaneously, the naming conventions “庇軹” (bì zhí), “庇輪” (bì lún), and “庇軫” (bì zhèn) rigorously aligned bow design with the chariot warfare hierarchy, achieving a codification shift from “physical dimensions” to “ritual rank”.⁵

Thus, a bow crafted to the standards of the *KaoGongJi* was, from its very inception, a physical embodiment of state authority and ritual order.

Moreover, the type of timber employed (such as linden or zelkova wood) and the specifications of the ornamentation (such as whether the bow body was coated with vermilion lacquer to become a “tong bow”, or whether the bow tips were inlaid with ivory or jade) all contained hierarchical codes. Among these, the ‘tong bow’ is recorded in *Shangshu* and the *Zuozhuan* as one of the highest-grade ritual vessels bestowed by the Zhou sovereign upon feudal lords or meritorious ministers, symbolising the conferral of legitimate authority behalf of the royal family.⁶

Thus, at that time, in the manufacturing process, the bow and arrow were first produced as a ritual vessel. Its primary function was to serve as a visual credential of hierarchical status and political legitimacy. Its practical utility and lethality were overshadowed and disciplined by the underlying order and power relations it represented. Through stringent regulations governing manufacturing standards, the state accomplished the first and fundamental ‘ritualisation’ of the source of violence.

3. Cohesion and The Politics of Gift-Giving

The distribution and circulation of manufactured bows and arrows did not occur through market channels, but rather within a political network woven through the principles of ritual propriety.

⁴ Translated by myself. Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* (Beijing University Press, 2000), p.1264-1265.

⁵ Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* (Beijing University Press, 2000), p. 1264-1265.

⁶ the original text is 「王曰：“父義和！其歸視爾師，寧爾邦。用賚爾秬一鬯卣，彤弓一，彤矢百，盧弓一，盧矢百，馬四匹。父往哉！柔遠能邇，惠康小民，無荒寧。簡恤爾都，用成爾顯德。」

Chinese Text Project, ‘*Shangshu*’, *The Book of Zhou*, < <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/charge-to-the-marquis-wen/zhs> > [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 2 of 2)

The primary function of this network was to consolidate feudal relationships and maintain internal cohesion within the aristocratic community. Circulation primarily manifests in two forms: bestowal and tributizing.

Within the vertical hierarchy of sovereign and subject, the conferral of the crimson bow, as previously described, constituted the most solemn political rite. Receiving this imperial gift signified formal incorporation into the Zhou royal authority system, conferring specific powers (the right to wage war) alongside corresponding obligations (loyalty and defence).⁷ This process sanctified the political subordination through the transfer of material objects.

In bestowments from sovereign to vassal, exemplified by the “Tong bow”, the Zhou sovereign symbolically conferred the right to wage war upon feudal lords through this ritual implement, thereby granting them political legitimacy and affirming their subordinate obligations. Conversely, in tributes from vassal to sovereign, the offering of fine bows and bows and raw materials for arrow production to the central court⁸ (such as Chu's tribute of “cypress timber, hides, and arrow shafts”) represented recognition of vassal status and the fulfilment of economic and political duties. Through these dual ceremonial exchanges, the circulation of bows and arrows embodied the relationship between the conferral of power and the affirmation of loyalty, functioning as a ‘ceremonial bond’ sustaining vertical cohesion within the aristocratic community. At this stage, bows and arrows primarily served as ‘ceremonial bonds’ linking internal members and as political tokens of allegiance. Their warlike attributes, directed against external foes, were temporarily suspended and downplayed within the sphere of circulation.

4. The Evolution of Practice

4.1 The Ritualisation of Warfare——Western Zhou to Early-Mid Spring and Autumn Period

During this period, the military realities of archery became intricately intertwined with ritualistic ideals, yet the ideological framework of ritual successfully assimilated and

⁷ the original text is 「王曰：“父義和！其歸視爾師，寧爾邦。用賚爾秬一鬯卣，彤弓一，彤矢百，盧弓一，盧矢百，馬四匹。父往哉！柔遠能邇，惠康小民，無荒寧。簡恤爾都，用成爾顯德。」

Chinese Text Project, ‘*Shangshu*’, *The Book of Zhou*, < <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/charge-to-the-marquis-wen/zhs> > [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 2 of 2)

⁸ the original text is 「以土會之法，辨五地之物生，以任土事，以令貢賦。」

Chinese Text Project, ‘*Zhou Li*’, *Di Guan Si Tu*, < <https://ctext.org/rites-of-zhou/di-guan-si-tu/zhs> > [accessed 29 January 2026] (para.62 of 171)

transformed its martial dimensions.

First, we must acknowledge its robust military foundation.

In warfare dominated by chariot warfare, each chariot carried three armoured warriors. The ‘left charioteer’ positioned on the left was a dedicated archer, often serving as the commander. The outcome of large-scale engagements frequently hinged upon the concentrated firepower of archers within vast chariot formations. Its tactical efficacy formed the bedrock upon which society depended.

According to *The Zuo Zhuan*, Year 2 of Duke Cheng: During the Battle of An between Qi and Jin, the Jin commander Xi Ke (serving as left archer) was struck by an arrow yet persisted in command. This demonstrates that archery was a primary means of targeting enemy commanders on the battlefield.⁹ Moreover, the account of the civil war in the State of Song recorded in *the Zuo Zhuan*, Chapter 21 of Duke Zhao's Reign, depicts a scene of ‘chariot combat duels’. These confrontations commenced and concluded with mutual archery exchanges, vividly illustrating that in chariot warfare, the bow and arrow served as the primary and decisive weapon prior to close engagement.¹⁰

4.1.1 Institutionalisation

Incorporating archery into the Six Arts (ritual, music, archery, charioteering, handwriting, mathematics) – the compulsory education system for noble offspring – thereby establishing it as an essential discipline for cultivating the character of the Junzi. This distinction separated archery from being viewed as a purely martial skill.

4.1.2 Ritual Transformation

A systematic framework of archery rites was established, encompassing the Grand Archery Ceremony, Rural Archery Ceremony, Guest Archery Ceremony, and Banquet Archery Ceremony. Within these rites, military movements became highly ritualised and codified. Evaluation criteria shifted beyond mere physical strength in piercing targets, focusing instead on whether movements conformed to ritual propriety, harmonised with musical rhythm (‘its

⁹ the original text is 「郤克傷於矢，流血及履，未絕鼓音……張侯曰：‘師之耳目，在吾旗鼓，進退從之。此車一人殿之，可以集事。’……左並轡，右援枹而鼓。馬逸不能止，師從之。齊師敗績。」

Chinese Text Project, ‘*Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan*’, Duke Cheng 2, < <https://ctext.org/chun-qiu-zuo-zhuan/cheng-gong-er-nian/zhs> > [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 2 of 2)

¹⁰ the original text is 「(公子城)與華豹相遇……華豹曰：‘城也！’城怒而反之。將注，豹則關矣。曰：‘平公之靈，尚輔相餘！’豹射，出其間。……(公子城)注矢則射之，殪。」

Chinese Text Project, ‘*Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan*’, Duke Zhao 21, < <https://ctext.org/chun-qiu-zuo-zhuan/zhao-gong-er-shi-yi-nian/zhs> > [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 2 of 2)

rhythm matches the music'), and whether demeanour was dignified and respectful ('inner resolve is upright, outer posture is straight'). *The Book of Rites: The Meaning of Archery* further interpreted victory or defeat in archery directly as a contest of superiority in 'moral virtue'. As stated in *The Book of Rites*: 'The Meaning of Archery, 'With mind serene and body upright, hold bow and arrow with steady grasp'¹¹ – this precisely requires the archer to cultivate his character before releasing the arrow. At this juncture, archery transcends its military utility, with its cultural and educational significance becoming all the more pronounced.

4.2 The Militarisation of Ritual—The Middle and Late Spring and Autumn Period

As the authority of the Zhou royal court waned, the wars of conquest among the feudal states grew increasingly fierce, accelerating the process of ritual decay. Though the old framework of ritual propriety remained in place, its constraints on military practice had greatly slackened, and the demands of actual warfare began to erode the norms of ceremonial conduct.

4.2.1 The Worship of Individual Martial Prowess :

Historical texts such as the *Strategies of the Warring States* provide exhaustive accounts of the exploits of Yang Youji, the 'divine archer.' The focus of societal acclaim was distinctly centred upon his extraordinary precision kill technique itself, rather than his moral character. Consider the following two examples:

There was a man in Chu named Yang Youji, renowned for his marksmanship. He could shoot a willow leaf from a hundred paces and never miss. Those around him all exclaimed, "How splendid!"¹²

Once, the court of Jing possessed a divine white ape. None of Jing's finest archers could strike it. The King of Jing then summoned Yang Youji to shoot it. Yang Youji drew his bow and arrows and approached. Before even aiming, he had already hit the target. When he released the arrow, the ape fell to the ground. Thus, Yang Youji achieved a double hit before the arrow even struck its mark.¹³

Though these two examples do not explicitly state the value judgement that 'skill far surpasses virtue,' they deliberately sidestep any mention of virtue, focusing solely on Yang Youji's supreme archery skill. This narrative choice itself embodies the core manifestation of

¹¹ Chinese Text Project, '*The Book of Rites*', *She Yi*, <<https://ctext.org/liji/she-yi/zhs>> [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 82 of 13)

¹² Translated by myself. Chinese Text Project, '*Zhan Guo Ce*', *Xi Zhou Ce*, *Xi Zhou*, <<https://ctext.org/zhan-guo-ce/xi-zhou/zhs>> [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 6 of 17)

¹³ Translated by myself. Chinese Text Project, '*Lv Shi Chun Qiu*', *Bu Gou Lun*, *Bo Zhi*, <<https://ctext.org/lv-shi-chun-qiu/bo-zhi/zhs>> [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 5 of 5)

technique being held in the highest esteem. Both Su Li and *Lüshi Chunqiu* cite Yang Youji as a paragon, not to disparage his virtue, but to omit any mention of virtue (whether good or bad) entirely, labelling him solely by his archery skills: ‘piercing the willow at a hundred paces’ and ‘striking the target before releasing the arrow.’ Contemporaries selected him as an exemplar solely because his archery was the universally acknowledged benchmark of the age; virtue was not a criterion for his evaluation. This stands in stark contrast to the Western Zhou ritual of archery, which insisted on pairing virtue with skill. This ‘silence’ on virtue precisely demonstrates that the technical dimension of archery had become an independent and central standard of recognition, a prevailing societal value orientation. This is the direct manifestation of technology being held in the highest esteem.

4.2.2 The standards of ritual etiquette faced a practical challenge.

Confucius' said in *The Analects*: ‘Archery does not demand piercing the hide, for strengths vary by class — this was the ancient way.’¹⁴ serves as crucial counter-evidence. What Confucius lamented was precisely that contemporary archery evaluation had become dominated by the pursuit of ‘penetrating the hide’ (prizing force and penetration), which contradicted the ancient ritual emphasis on form over brute strength. This vividly demonstrates how military efficacy standards were openly challenging and supplanting traditional ritual norms.

4.3 The Technologisation of Warfare——The Warring States Period

During the Warring States period, ritual systems disintegrated amidst wars of conquest.

Legalist reforms established a new logic for the state: At this time, the military function of bows and arrows was utterly liberated from ceremonial constraints, serving solely the utilitarian calculations of the state.

4.3.1 Ideological Shift

The Five Vermin of *Han Feizi* posited that ‘the present age competes through strength and vigour,’ setting the tone for the era. All values, including technology, were judged solely by their capacity to enhance national power.

4.3.2 Institutional Revolution——Military Merit Rank System

This constituted the pivotal shift. Shang Yang's reforms established the ‘First Merit System,’ granting ranks according to the number of enemy heads taken. Individual status shifted from being based on bloodline to being based on military merit. As the most efficient long-range

¹⁴ He Yan 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, Lunyu zhushu 論語注疏, (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2011), p.28.

Chinese Text Project, ‘Lun Yu’, *Ba Yi*, <<https://ctext.org/analects/ba-yi/zhs>> [accessed 29 January 2026] (para. 16 of 26)

killing technology, proficiency with the bow and arrow directly determined the efficiency of acquiring military merit, thereby dictating the speed of social advancement and economic gains. Thus, the bow and arrow evolved from a static symbol of ritual propriety into a merit-based credential exchangeable for political and economic capital.

4.3.3 State-led Social Mobilisation

Li Kui's 'Archery Practice Decree' mandated resolving civil disputes through archery contests. This law forcibly linked civil litigation with military training, embodying the state's comprehensive war mobilisation of societal resources.

4.3.4 State Technological Integration

King Wuling of Zhao's reform of 'Hu clothing and mounted archery' extended far beyond mere alterations to military training. It involved adopting the attire of nomadic peoples (Hu clothing) to facilitate mounted archery, alongside the systematic study and adaptation of their cavalry tactics. This constituted a state-led, top-down overhaul of military technology.

The reforms directly dismantled the traditional ceremonial attire of wide-sleeved robes prevalent in the Central Plains (clothing being a symbol of hierarchical governance through ritual), with King Wuling of Zhao countering the conservatives by prioritising military efficacy over ceremonial dress under the core principle of 'advancing military prowess.' This underscores how the development of archery skills (equestrian archery) during the Warring States period was entirely driven by practical warfare utility.

5. Conclusion

Through an examination of the manufacture, circulation, usage, and significance of bows and arrows, it becomes evident that pre-Qin society successively employed two distinct systems—"ritual propriety" and "rules/technology"—to govern this core technology.

During the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods, under the 'ritual governance' model, bows and arrows underwent a process of "civilisation". Their manufacture adhered to hierarchical symbols, their circulation reinforced political bonds, and their use was transformed into moral cultivation. Through the system of 'ritual', society channelled and redirected the violent potential of technology to maintain the feudal aristocratic order based on kinship and ethics.

In the Warring States period, under the 'legal/strategic governance' model, bows and arrows were thoroughly 'instrumentalised'. Their manufacture prioritised lethal efficiency

(evident in the evolution of arrowhead designs), distribution was based on military merit records, and their use directly served the purposes of killing enemies and securing promotions. Society, through a 'law/strategy' system centred on the military merit rank system, fully unleashed and directed this violent potential outward. This drove the transformation of society into a war machine, aimed at establishing a centralised bureaucratic empire based on law and performance.

The metamorphosis of the bow and arrow from 'adorned with ritual for warfare' to 'driving the populace through strategy' mirrors the fundamental transformation of pre-Qin society: from a feudal community bound by ritual and blood ties, it gradually gave rise to the nascent military state, held together by law and utilitarianism. As an 'agent of action,' the bow and arrow was not only shaped by society but also accelerated this historical process.

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