Skill in traditional archery died out in China (among the Han Chinese, at least) at the turn of the 20th Century, when the Emperor Guangxu deleted archery from the syllabus of the Imperial Military Examination in 1901. Before that, however, archery had always had a place in the imperial military examination system since its inception in the Tang Dynasty in the year 702 of our era. Indeed, archery had been an important element in Chinese aristocratic life well before that, and was mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions dating back almost 3,500 before the present time.

At the heart of nearly all Chinese martial arts forms still practiced today (whether individual solo sets or paired fights) is the concept of face-to-face combat with the hands or weapons. Ritual archery is different: two competitors shoot at a common target. For this reason, ritual archery was singled out by Confucius, who said that archery was the only proper way a ‘civilized man’ could compete. Confucius’s endorsement was enough to assure archery a prized place among the Chinese martial arts for centuries.

It is not possible to describe in simple terms what Chinese archery ‘was like’. It was practiced by millions of people over thousands of years. At times there were dozens of schools with their own methods. In addition, there were different styles for different purposes.

For example, shooting with either the bow or the crossbow were both considered to be “archery.” Bows could shoot an arrow or else a hard
pellet. An arrow-bow could be shot on foot or on horseback. Each usage required its own methods - and those methods changed over the centuries.

Archery in China in the pre-Shang period

At the risk of stating the obvious, archery was used in hunting and warfare in pre-Shang times. In mentioning this point, I should add that there is adequate archaeological evidence to support such a view, but little to illuminate any other aspect of archery culture at those times. Pre-Shang animal and human remains have been found with arrow wounds, and cliff paintings considered to date from pre-Shang times show scenes of hunting activities with a bow and arrow.

Shamanism as a component of the archery tradition?

Legend (Zuo Zhuan, Shan Hai Jing, Huai Nan Zi among others. Selby Chapter 2.) sets the Xia period as the background for two stories concerning the archer ‘Yi’ . In one tale, he shoots down ten suns in the sky, and in the other, he usurps the throne of Xia, but devotes all his time to the hunt and neglects affairs of state. He is ultimately assassinated. These two tales were widely confused (principally by Qu Yuan in his Chu Ci cycle of poems.)

The tale of an archer shooting the sun is both long-lived and widespread. The tale is folk-tale recorded from Guangxi to Mongolia (Erekhe Mergen). A Han commentator regarded ‘Yi’ as being the name of a class of archery instructors rather than an individual. The legend links archery with praying for rain in times of drought. Were the ‘Yi’ class in fact a class of archery shamans who controlled magical properties of the bow and arrow?

Archery in the Shang Oracle bones.

The oracle bones are an important, contemporary written record of life in Shang China. Over 60,000 specimens in collections around the world allow us to see how the bow was used in hunting, what sort of quarry were hunted with it, what other methods were favoured, and what season was the hunting season.

The shooting of enemy with bows is also recorded. One of these
enemy were the people named the Qiang. Although superficially one might take it for granted that the Qiang were an enemy tribe waging war against the Shang, there is nevertheless a close similarity between the way animals were listed as prey in hunts and the way the Qiang recorded. Both Qiang and animals were similarly used as sacrifices to the ancestors. We should not exclude the possibility that the Shang nation regarded the Qiang as half-animal, and hunted them for sport and to provide material for sacrifices.

Sima Qian's Yin Ben Ji (Shiji: Yin Ben Ji: Di Wu Yi, Selby: 3D.) relates how Wu Yi resorted to black magic ('shooting at heaven') with the bow and arrow. Tentatively, I put 'magic' as one of the cultural attributes of archery in the Shang period.

Archery and education in the Zhou period

The tradition alluded to in the Zhou Li, in which archery formed part of the syllabus of the xiao xue education curriculum (Zhou Li: di guan - Bao Shi, Zheng Zhong's note.), as well as the rich ritual tradition of archery first recorded in the ‘Rites’ (Yi li, Li ji. Selby: 4D) and elsewhere, were probably recorded in the Spring and Autumn Period. But the ritual practices recorded would reflect Western Zhou usage.

Archery in Zhou tradition had a number of ritual expressions:

* the three-tier archery competition rituals (she li)

* the sou hunting ritual

* the ‘bow and arrow dance’

* the ritual presentation of bows and arrows as tokens of office

These expressions can all be regarded as a natural outgrowth of the use of the bow and arrow in hunting and warfare. Logically more remote, however, are the claims in the Confucian ‘Archery Ritual’ (Li Ji: She Yi, Selby: 5B.) that the shooting of a bow was a right of passage (at birth and puberty) and was the proper method of selection of officials. Key to the explanation is the use of two sets of puns: the She pun and the Ze pun. In one we see ‘shooting’ punned with ‘release of emotion,’ and
in the other, we see 'fecundity' punned with 'select' and 'manifest.' Confucian idealists were using such word-play to put expression to their view of the purpose of archery in ritual and selection.

The Zhou addition to the cultural baggage of archery should therefore be regarded as a ritual/religious layer and a badge of office for certain ranks, probably at the shi level.

The Eastern Zhou transition

In the Han (or Jin?) historical novel, 'Romance of Wu and Yue' by Zhao Ye, Chen Yin sets out the history of the bow and arrow. (Zhao Ye: Wu Yue Chunqiu. Selby: 8A.) The Han perception was that in the Eastern Zhou, mastery of the bow and arrow passed from the aristocracy to the common people (in his state of Chu, the 'spiritual homeland' of the Liu Royal household). He also makes explicit the role of the crossbow in this progression. Zhao Ye's exposition is a highly-plausible description of the true evolution of the art.

However, for the early part of the Eastern Zhou period, the ritual performance of archery flourished among the aristocracy. There is abundant archaeological evidence of Eastern Zhou performance of archery:

* in ritual,

* in warfare,

* in hunting, and

* as a sport.

Literary evidence further exists of archery in the selection of candidates offered by the zhuhou to the royal household under the feudal system. Archery magic also appears in Warring States literature, together with a growing link with funerary practices, such as the 'protective' filigree thumb-ring.

How did archery come to retain its link with the aristocratic classes?

The development of mounted archery tactics among the Han
Chinese as a response to Hun incursions is attributed to King Wuling of Zhao (325-298 BCE). The crossbow had become the weapon of choice in infantry tactics, as can be seen from the Qin terracotta formations at Xi’an. But except for a weak version, crossbows did not translate to horseback tactics because they were loaded using the feet.

It requires intensive training to become sufficiently proficient with a traditional Asian bow to be able to rely on it in a life-threatening situation. The aristocratic elite maintained their command of the bow and arrow through their practice of hunting with chariots and from the leisure time they could devote to perfecting their skills. The aristocracy were also the ones who had stocks of horses. Thus it was that the debate that is recorded (‘Yan Tie Lun, Zhan Guo Ce’ (Zhan Guo Ce: Wuling Wang Ping Chen Jian Ju. Selby p. 175 fn 17.) about adoption of mounted archery by the Chinese involved the question of putting the aristocrats on horseback: not the ordinary soldiery.)

In the Eastern Zhou, therefore, tactical and technological developments pushed the aristocracy with their bows and arrows onto horseback, and placed crossbows into the hands of the common people in the rank-and-file. (The very reverse of what happened among the English and French aristocracy in the Middle Ages.)

The Militarization of archery

The Confucians had, at some point, chosen to stress the non-military aspect of archery. That trend is summed up in Jun zi wu suo zheng; bi ye, she hu (Selby: 5A). I believe that in the Eastern Zhou, archery had been received from previous eras as a semi-religious, ritual experience with further expression in hunting (to gain sacrifices for the ancestors) and warfare. Even in warfare, if the account of the Battle of Yanling (Zuo: Cheng Gong 16. Selby: 71.) is to be believed, archery was fraught with taboos. Contrast Yanling with the crossbow tactics at Maling (Shiji: Sunzi Wuqi Liezhuang. Selby: 8E)

Despite Wang Meng’s belated attempt to revive the rituals prior to his interregnum (Hou Han Shu: Liu Kun Zhan. Selby: 8H.), the ritual aspects of archery were almost forgotten in the Han period. Nevertheless, there is abundant archaeological evidence of archery in hunting, warfare and funeral imagery (where Yi shooting the Suns in
the Fusang tree re-appears.) Practical aspects of archery mental training were also chosen as images to illustrate philosophical points in Taoism, as seen in the works ‘Liezi’ and ‘Zhuangzi’.

But in practical terms, it was in military affairs that archery took the lead during the Han Dynasty. Interaction with the northern tribes on the battlefield kept up the pressure to hone mounted archery skills. General Li Guang’s exploits against the Xiongnu are a case in point (Qian Han Shu: Li Guang Liezhuan. Selby: 8L). Certain military ranks in the Han military system also appear to have been appointed on the basis of military skills. (Han Shu: Zhi Guan. Selby: 8K.)

According to the Ming author, Gu Yu, (Gu Yu: She Shu Si Juan: Lidai Wuzhi Kao. Selby: 8J) when the provincial rites were over on the first day of Autumn, military examinations started. Military officials provided training in ritual archery and the ritual sacrifice of animals, as well as the Military Classics.

Presumably it was during the Han Dynasty that much of the Confucian elaboration of the Zhou rituals must have occurred. Confucius’s (apparent) close connection with the ‘Archery Ritual’ (‘she yi’. Selby: 5B.) - he is both quoted in it and appears as a protagonist in the narrative - proved immensely influential when it came to formalizing the imperial system for selection of military officers.

Archery and the formalization of the military appointment system

The move to a formal, relatively objective and nationwide system for selecting military officials seems to have started in the Northern Wei period, when it became necessary to overcome the family-centered and ethnocentric systems of appointing officials that was endemic in the Wei-Jin period. Chinese historians have naturally associated archery with the nomadic tribes of the north, and it is these tribes who dominated the aristocratic lines of North China in the Wei-Jin Period.

In his struggle for the unification of China, Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty needed to undermine the traditional power-bases of the aristocratic warlord families. In 607, he implemented examinations in 10 areas, including military affairs. There is no direct historical description of the content of the Sui military examinations; but from
contemporary biographies of officials who passed them, we can see that they had a strong Confucian content and included practical displays of military skills, which would certainly have included archery on foot and on horseback.

The Confucian Base of the Tang examination system

The chapters in the ‘Tong Dian’ on the Tang Examination system say explicitly that “The method of offering up officers (shi) in the Great Tang basically followed the Sui system.” (Tong Dian: Cap. 15. Xuanju 5.) Nevertheless, you cannot read more than a practical, military objective into the words of Li Shimin when he re-established military training in 622. (Jiu Tang Shu: Taizong Benji. Selby: 9A.)

The establishment of the Military Examination System (wu ke ju) by Wu Zetian in 702 coincided with the publication of an archery manual (attributed to Wang Ju) (Selby: 9B) intended to prepare those taking the official examinations. It draws directly on the Confucian ‘Archery Classic’, and can be said to be a practical elaboration of technique of the ‘Classic’. There can be no doubt those undertaking the military examinations in the Sui and Tang period understood that they were continuing the overall structure and objectives expressed in the Confucian classic: submission, expression of the inner self and competition within limits approved by Confucian orthodoxy.

Thus decorum, elegance of movement and deference to one’s peers were to the fore. The Tang text stresses that ‘archery’ is ritual archery, which needs to be expressed with grace and restraint, in order to ‘hit’ the target (that is, accord with ritual). Although Wang Ju’s text is based in practical archery method, only the terse comments on horseback archery could be regarded as utilitarian military method. The rest is a refined ritual event.

Certain current versions of Japanese Kyudo ritual archery (raisha), while using equipment radically different from that used in China, follow the movements in the Tang Classic of Wang Ju step-by-step.

Cultural and acquired archery skills

The development of archery in military and hunting practice after
the Tang Dynasty can be divided into two streams. There was a nomadic cultural stream that was the patrimony of the horse-based cultures of the North. This stream can be summed up by Sima Qian’s description of how Hun children rode with their mothers before they could walk, learned archery riding on a goat and shooting rats as infants, and were well skilled for hunting and warfare by maturity. (Shiji: Xiongnu Liezhuan. Selby: 8G.)

The Han Chinese did not regard archery as an innate skill, although they were quick to claim outstanding archery skills for model founding emperors of new dynasties. (Han Shu: Chao Cuo Liezhuan. Selby: 84H.) Nevertheless, archery was an acquired skill for the Han Chinese, and the acquisition took place most likely in an aristocratic sporting or educational setting.

Texts on archery from the Song and later periods treated archery on foot and mounted archery separately. They offered few insights beyond what was set out in Wang Ju’s Tang text. Much was made of the aesthetic aspects of archery on foot, and layers of philosophical introspection were added. Mounted archery, on the other hand, was utilitarian and fast. Writing in around 1040 the compiler of a Song military encyclopaedia, Zeng Gongliang, roundly attacked Wang Ju’s ‘flowery’ method (Zeng Gongliang: Wu Jing Zong Yao. Selby: 10L.) Judging from the continued preference for the ‘flowery style’ into the Ming Dynasty, however, his views did not have much influence.

Despite acquiring skill in horseback archery through training, there is no sign that the Han Chinese troops were not good at it. It would be wrong to imagine that the defeat at the hands of the Mongols and the fall of the Southern Song was due to unfamiliarity or an inability to deal with mounted archery tactics. That was largely a European defect.

Ming archery was firmly rooted in the Confucian tradition. In the early part of the Hong Wu reign, Zhu Yuanzhang appears to have re-established the full archery ritual in parallel with the military examination, which had lapsed during the Yuan Dynasty. (Hong Wu 3: Edict on the Establishment of the Examination System. Selby: 11A.)

In both the Song and Ming military examinations, there was a controversy over whether to give preference to candidates who could
shoot a heavy arrow from a strong bow, or those who were accurate. At one time or another in the Song Period, the pendulum swung either way, sometimes with complex factors applied to marry the two criteria. (Song Shi: Xuanju 3. Selby: 10R.)

Later, a fashion grew up of including a further element in the examination system: apart from archery on foot and on horseback, candidates were required to pull a heavy bow from which no arrow was shot. This test seems to have started in the Ming Dynasty and became established in the Qing military examinations.

**Examination archery was not battlefield archery**

There is further evidence of a discrepancy growing between the demands of the military examination system and the demands of the battlefield. In training armies to deal with the Japanese coastal incursions in the 16th century, Yu Dayou and Qi Jiguang, like Zeng Gongliang in the Song Dynasty, disdained the 'flowery' skills of the examination candidates, and developed alternative battle skills for archery on foot (see Selby. p. 277). We can speculate that Chinese military archery pre-supposed that the main action would be on horseback; but new tactical considerations with the anti-Japanese Wo Kou campaigns required archery in coastal areas and onboard ship, where horseback archery technique was of no use.

For a military examination system, you would have thought that skill in practical, battlefield techniques would have been what was required. But apart from horseback archery, that was not the case.

At the end of the Ming Dynasty, two works were published that concentrated on military technique, one by Li Chengfen and the other by Gao Ying. But neither became popular. The demand among candidates for the examinations was for books illustrating what is clearly a continuation of the elegance of the Confucian, ritual style.

The inutility of such a style – and indeed the inutility of archery as a whole in the face of modern, Western battlefield technology – ultimately consigned the antiquated archery syllabus in the military examination system to the scrap-heap in 1901. (Liu Jincao: "Xu Wenxian Tongkao: xuanju 5". Selby: 13G.)
Conclusion

How unbroken is the tradition?

A disjunctive occurs with the fall of courtly ritual in the Warring States period. To what tradition did the ‘Shi’ participating in the archery rituals of the Warring States regard themselves as heirs?

We cannot hope to find more than fragments from the pre-Shang times, from when no written record has come down to us. But interpreting the evidence generously, magic and shamanism were the domain of the Yi clan. (In Chapter 2 of my book, Chinese Archery, I have done a more ambitious job of collating these scraps than is possible within the scope of a paper like this one.)

The legend of Yi remained popular in folklore and found its way into funereal art even of Northern Wei times. The idealized Confucian work, the ‘Zhou Li’, which may have originated in the Eastern Zhou state of Qi, explicitly states that there was magic involved in the target, to bring the feudal lords into line. I believe that the cultural heritage accruing to ritual archery in Warring States times included an element of magical power that echoed the activities of the archery Shamans of the distant past.

Further disjunctures are less acute. The weakening of ritual beliefs throughout the Han and Wei-Jin periods were replaced by the inclusion of the Confucian orthodoxy (in the form of the ‘Archery Classic’, which itself acknowledged archery magic though the theory of the hou target, rites of passage for males and ritual dance movements to music). The Confucian ‘Archery Classic’ acted as centre of a major gravitational force. Once formally incorporated in the Imperial Examination System, not only did the Confucian system ensure that the traditions of the Zhou period remained alive, it even exerted an influence in maintaining archery as a semi-ritual pursuit outside the purely practical field of military affairs, despite being part of the syllabus of a supposed ‘military examination’.

If this tradition has died out in China, it is not altogether lost. The practice of traditional archery in both Korea and China up to the present day recognises, preserves and respects aspects of the cultural tradition of Confucian ritual archery.