The Historical Knight-Errant

and glory. At heart he admires neither, but keeps his admiration for the knights-errant:

However, some commoners established mutual faith and were praised a thousand miles around for their altruism. They would meet death without caring what the world thought of them. These men had their own good points, and what they did, they did not do lightly. Therefore, when a man was in trouble, he could entrust his life to such men. Are these not what we call ‘virtuous, worthy, outstanding men’? If the knights-errant from the villages had been asked to compete with scholars like Chi-tzu’ and Yuan Hsien in wielding power to serve the world they lived in, their achievements would have been less great. But if it is considered necessary for men to accomplish what they set out to do and mean what they say, then how can one do without the principles of knight-errantry?

Having thus justified the knights-errant, the author expresses his regret that little is known about the knights-errant of antiquity. He then singles out for admiration knights who were commoners, as distinct from chivalrous noblemen who harboured knights as their guests. On the other hand, he carefully distinguishes knights-errant from mere local bullies:

About the plebeian knights-errant of antiquity, we have no means of obtaining information. In more recent times, the princes of Meng-ch'ang, Ch'un-shen, P'ing-yuan, Hsin-lin, and others, being royal kinsmen and relying on their landed wealth and high ranks, attached to themselves worthy men from all over the empire and spread their fame among the feudal lords. One cannot say these princes were not worthies. Yet what they did was like shouting in the direction of the wind: it is not that the sound travels faster than normal, but the speed of the wind carries it on.

As for the knights-errant who came from humble alleys, and who disciplined their action and cherished their honour so that their fame spread all over the empire, what they did was truly difficult. However, both the Confucians and the Mohists rejected them as being unworthy of mentioning. Consequently, the names of plebeian knights-errant who lived before Ch'in times have vanished—a fact that I deeply regret.

As far as I know, since the rise of the Han dynasty, there have been many knights such as Chu Chia, T'ien Chung, Wang Kung, Chü Meng, and Kuo Hsien. Although they often offended the laws of the times, in their private lives they showed unselfishness, integrity, and modesty, which well deserve our praise. Their fame was not built on nothing, and men did not follow them for no reason. As for those who formed cliques among their friends and clansmen, plotting together to enrich themselves and exploiting the poor, using force to bully the weak and indulging their desires to satisfy themselves, the knights-errant too regarded them as shameful. I am grieved that the ordinary people of the world do not realize this but hastily condemn men like Chu Chia and Kuo Hsien with the bullies.

After this preamble, Ssu-ma Ch'ien gives an account of the lives of several knights-errant. Moreover, in other sections of the Records of the Historiographer, there are more examples of men who acted in a chivalrous way, even if they are not always called ‘knights-errant’ in so many words. The following accounts are translated from various parts of this monumental work. I have telescoped paragraphs from different biographies to make a more coherent story when necessary, and have omitted some minor details.

Prince Wu-chi (ob. 243 B.C.), Hau Ying (326–257 B.C.), and Chu Hai

Prince Wu-chi of Wei was the youngest son of King Chao of Wei (reigned 295–277 B.C.) and half-brother of King An-hsi (reigned 276–243 B.C.). When King Chao died and King An-hsi came to the throne, the latter enfeoffed Wu-chi as Prince of Hsin-lin (in modern Honan province).

The Prince was kind by nature and humbled himself before knights. No matter whether they were worthy or not, he would treat them all with courtesy, and would not dare to behave haughtily because of his wealth and noble rank. However, both the Confucians and the Mohists rejected them as being unworthy of mentioning. Consequently, the names of plebeian knights-errant who lived before Ch'in times have vanished—a fact that I deeply regret.

As far as I know, since the rise of the Han dynasty, there have been
of Chao was invading Wei. The King of Wei put down his pieces and was about to summon the ministers for discussion, but the Prince stopped him, saying, 'The King of Chao is hunting, not coming to invade us.' And he went on playing as before. The King was afraid and could not keep his mind on the game. After a while, news came again from the north that the King of Chao was hunting, not invading Wei. The King of Wei was greatly astonished and asked the Prince, 'How could you know it?' The Prince replied, 'One of my guests can obtain the secrets of the King of Chao. Whatever he does, my guest reports to me. That is how I know.' After this incident, the King of Wei was jealous and afraid of the Prince, and would not entrust State affairs to him.

There was a recluse in Wei named Hou Ying. In his seventieth year, because of poverty, he worked as the gate-keeper of Yi Men, the Eastern Gate of the capital Ta-liang (modern K'ai-feng). When the Prince heard of him, he went to visit Hou and wished to give him a handsome sum of money. Hou refused, saying, 'I have cultivated my personal integrity for several decades, and I will never receive money from Your Highness, poor gate-keeper as I am.' Thereupon the Prince prepared a great banquet and invited many guests. When they were seated, the Prince left with some attendants. He kept empty the seat of honour on the left in his carriage and went personally to the Eastern Gate to request Hou's presence. Holding his tattered clothes, Hou went straight to the carriage and took the seat of honour, without even making a show of declining, so as to test the Prince. The Prince, holding the reins, looked even more deferential. Then Hou Ying said to the Prince, 'I have a friend who is a butcher at the market-place. May I bother you to drive your carriage there?' The Prince drove the carriage to the market-place, and Hou came down to see his friend Chu Hai. He deliberately looked arrogantly left and right, and stood there talking for a long time, while secretly observing the Prince's reaction. The expression on the Prince's face became even milder. At that time, the generals, ministers, and royal clansmen of Wei, who were the Prince's guests, were all waiting for him to start the banquet. Simultaneously, the people in the market-place saw the Prince holding the reins for Hou Ying, while all the attendants privately cursed Hou. Seeing that the Prince still did not change his expression, Hou said good-bye to his friend and took to the carriage. On arriving home, the Prince led Hou to the seat of honour and introduced him in flattering terms to the guests. All the guests were astonished. When they became high-spirited with wine, the Prince rose and toasted Hou, wishing him long life. Hou took this opportunity to say to the Prince, 'Today I have made you suffer enough. I am only the gate-keeper of the Eastern Gate, yet Your Highness came personally in your carriage to fetch me before a crowd. It was not proper for you to visit me, yet you purposely visited me. However, I wished to make your name for you, so I kept you waiting for a long time at the market-place, and went to see my friend to observe your reaction. You became even more respectful. All the people in the market-place thought me a petty man and you a worthy lord who could humble himself before men.' So they stopped drinking, and from that moment Hou Ying was treated as a guest of honour.

Hou said to the Prince, 'The butcher I visited, called Chu Hai, is a worthy man, but the world cannot appreciate him. That is why he hides his light among butchers.' The Prince went several times to visit Chu, but the latter never returned the courtesy. The Prince wondered why.

In 217 B.C., King Chao of Ch'in defeated the troops of Chao and besieged the capital of Chao, Han-tan (in modern Hopei). Prince Wu-chi's elder sister was married to the Prince of Ping-yuan, younger brother of the former King of Chao. She wrote several times to the King of Wei and the Prince for help. So the King of Wei sent General Chin Pi with an army of a hundred thousand men to come to the rescue of Chao. The King of Ch'in sent a messenger to the King of Wei, saying, 'I am attacking Chao and expect the capital to fall any moment. If any other feudal lord dares to come to the rescue of Chao, I will divert my forces to attack him as soon as Chao is conquered.' The King of Wei became afraid and sent someone to stop Chin Pi, telling him to encamp at Yeh (on the border between Chao and Wei), thus nominally coming to aid Chao but actually waiting to see which side would win. The Prince of Ping-yuan sent one messenger after another to Wei and reproached Prince Wu-chi: 'The reason why I attached myself in marriage to your family was that I thought you were full of noble altruism and could save people in trouble.'
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distress. Now, Han-tan may surrender to Ch'in any moment, yet
no aid has come from Wei. Where is the proof you can save people
in distress? Besides, even if you do not think much of me and
will abandon me to surrender to Ch'in, have you no pity for your
sister? Prince Wu-chi was worried and several times spoke to
the King. He also sent sophists to persuade the King with
every possible argument, but the King, frightened of Ch'in, would
not listen. The Prince reckoned that he could never get the King's
consent to act, but resolved he would not remain alive alone and
let Chao perish. So he asked some of his guests to follow him,
gathered together over a hundred carriages, and was about to go
to meet the Ch'in army and perish with Chao.

When the Prince passed the Eastern Gate, he went to see Hou
Ying and told the latter why he was going to meet the Ch'in army
in this suicidal manner. Hou said, 'Courage to Your Highness!
Your old servant cannot follow.' After the Prince had gone a few
miles, he was unhappy and said to himself, 'I have treated Hou
Ying with every possible kindness, as the whole world knows.
Now I am about to die, yet he did not say anything to me as a
farewell message. Could it be I have missed something?' So he
turned his carriage back and went to see Hou again. Hou laughed
and said, 'I knew Your Highness would come back! Your High­
ness is fond of keeping knights, as is known all over the empire.
Now, faced with a disaster, you have no better plan than going to
meet the Ch'in army, like throwing meat to a hungry tiger: what
is the use? And what is the use of having guests then? However,
Your Highness treated me with great kindness, but I did not send
you off properly; that is why I knew you would come back.'

The Prince bowed twice and asked his advice. Hou Ying then
asked all attendants to be dismissed and said, 'I hear that half of
the tally that gave Chin Pi control over the army is, constantly
kept in the King's bedroom. Now Lady Ju is the King's favourite
and often goes in and out of his bedroom. She should be able to
steal it. I have heard that Lady Ju's father was murdered, and she
grieved for three years, but no one, from the King downwards,
could find the murderer and avenge her father's death. At last she
told you in tears, and you sent a guest to kill her enemy. He
succeeded and presented the enemy's head to her. Lady Ju would
be willing to die for you; only she has not had a chance. If you
will but say the word, she will certainly do what you wish. Then,
with the 'tiger tally', you can take over the army from Chin Pi,
save Chao in the north, and repel the Ch'in troops from the west.
This is an enterprise worthy of the Big Five.' The Prince followed
his advice and asked Lady Ju, who did steal the King's half of
the tally and give it to the Prince.

The Prince was about to leave, when Hou Ying said, 'When a
general is leading an army outside, he can refuse to obey an order
from the King in the national interest. Now, even if you show
Chin Pi your half of the tally and it fits, he may refuse to obey but
ask for further orders from the King. Then things would be
dangerous. You had better take my friend, the butcher Chu Hai,
with you. He is a very strong man. If Chin Pi will obey, all is well;
if not, let Chu kill him.' On hearing this, the Prince wept. Hou
asked, 'Is Your Highness afraid of death? Why are you weeping?'
The Prince replied, 'Chin Pi is a tempestuous old general. I am
afraid he will not obey and I shall have to kill him. That is why I
am weeping. How can I be afraid of death?'

The Prince then asked Chu Hai to go with him. Chu laughed and
said, 'I am a mere butcher, but Your Highness has visited me
several times. The reason why I never returned the courtesy
was that I thought petty courtesy was useless. Now you have an
emergency; this is the time for me to repay you, even with my
life.' So he joined the Prince.

Once more the Prince came to take his leave of Hou Ying. Hou
said, 'I should follow you, but cannot because of my age. Allow
me to count the days of your journey, and on the day you should
reach the army, I will look towards the north and cut my throat to
bid you farewell.' Thereupon the Prince left.

When he reached Yeh, he pretended to have an order from the
King to replace Chin Pi. Chin Pi put the two halves of the tally
/together, but still had his doubts. Raising his hands and looking
at the Prince, he said, 'I am leading an army of a hundred thousand
men on the border. This is a heavy responsibility to the country.

1 Pien-chih, men who specialized in persuasion.
2 The tally (ju) was cast in bronze in the shape of a tiger and consisted of
two halves. One half was kept by the king, the other half given to the general.
If the king had further orders, he would send his half to the general, who
would put the two halves together to see if they tallied.

Five powerful feudal lords of an earlier age, namely the Dukes of Ch'i,
Chin, Ch'in, and Sung, and the King of Ch'u.
Now you come all alone to replace me: how can that be?' He was about to refuse, when Chu Hai, who had hidden an iron hammer weighing forty catties in his sleeve, killed Chin Pi with it. The Prince then took control of the army and issued the following order: 'If father and son are both in the army, let the father go home; if two brothers are in the army, let the elder one go home; if only son, go home to look after your parents!' Thus he had eighty thousand choice soldiers left, with whom he attacked the Ch'in forces. The Ch'in army withdrew, so the siege of Han-tan was raised and the kingdom of Chao saved. The king of Chao and the Prince of P'ing-yuan came personally to the border to welcome Prince Wu-chi. The Prince of P'ing-yuan, carrying the bow-case and the quiver, led the way before Prince Wu-chi. The King of Chao bowed twice and said, 'Since ancient times, there has been no worthy man comparable to Your Highness!' At that time, the Prince of P'ing-yuan (who formerly was known as one of the four princes who retained knights) dared not compare himself with the others.

Prior to this, on the day when the Prince reached the army, Hou Ying really cut his throat while looking towards the north. The King of Wei was angry with the Prince for having stolen the tally and killed Chin Pi, and the Prince knew this. So, having saved Chao, he sent a general to lead the army back to Wei, while he himself with his guests stayed in Chao. The King of Chao, out of gratitude, wished to enfeoff Prince Wu-chi with five towns. When the Prince heard this, he was proud and showed signs of self-satisfaction. Thereupon one of his guests advised him: 'Some things one must not forget, same things one must forget. If someone else has done Your Highness a kindness, you must not forget it; if Your Highness has done someone else a kindness, then I wish you would forget it. Moreover, what you did—forging the King's order and taking over the army from Chin Pi by force—was a meritorious deed to Chao, but hardly loyal to Wei. Yet Your Highness seems to be proud of it and to regard this as your merit. In my humble opinion, this is not worthy of you.' The Prince at once felt as ashamed of himself as if there had been no place to hide. When the King of Chao received the Prince, he swept the road and personally welcomed the Prince. Observing the duties of a host, the King led the Prince to the western stairway (the guest's approach to the hall). The Prince, walking sideways in humility, declined the honour and ascended the hall by the eastern stairway (the host's approach). Then he reproached himself, saying that he had betrayed Wei without having done anything meritorious for Chao. The King of Chao entertained him with wine till evening, but was too embarrassed to bring up the subject of offering the Prince five towns, since the latter was so humble. Eventually the Prince stayed in Chao, and the King of Chao offered him the town of Hao (in modern Hopei) as his 'bathing place'. The King of Wei also offered Hsin-ling back to the Prince, but he remained in Chao.

The Prince had heard that in Chao there were two men of ability who chose to remain in obscurity. One was called Grandfather Ma'o, who lived among gamblers; the other was known as Grandfather Hsüeh, who worked in a wine shop. The Prince wished to see them, but they hid themselves and would not see him. Finally the Prince heard where they were and went on foot to see them. On meeting each other, they became great friends. When the Prince of P'ing-yuan heard of this, he said to his wife, 'At first I heard your brother was a paragon of virtue, now I hear he is associating with gamblers and wine-sellers. He is only a rash person!' When she told the Prince this, the latter asked permission to leave, saying, 'At first I heard the Prince of P'ing-yuan was a worthy man, and that is why I betrayed the King of Wei to save Chao, so as to satisfy the Prince. Now I see he makes friends merely to show his generosity, not to seek worthy men. Ever since I was in Ta-liang, I had already heard of these two men. When I came to Chao, I was afraid I could not get to know them. Even with someone like me, I was afraid they would not want to know me. Now the Prince of P'ing-yuan thinks it a shame to know them! He is not worthy to be a friend.' Thereupon Prince Wu-chi started to get his luggage ready for departure. When his sister told her husband, the Prince of P'ing-yuan, with hat off, apologized to Prince Wu-chi, and firmly asked him to stay. When the guests of the Prince of P'ing-yuan heard this, half of them left him to join Prince Wu-chi, and knights from other parts of the empire also came to follow the Prince.

The Prince stayed in Chao for ten years without going back.
When the King of Ch’in heard the Prince was in Chao, he sent troops eastward to attack Wei day and night. The King of Wei was worried and sent a messenger to ask the Prince back. The Prince, for fear the King was still angry with him, warned his retainers: ‘If anyone dares to speak on behalf of the King’s messenger, he dies.’ Since all the retainers had disobeyed the King of Wei and followed the Prince to Chao, none of them dared to advise him to return. At that time, Grandfather Mao and Grandfather Hsueh went to see the Prince and said, ‘The reason why Your Highness is so much esteemed in Chao and so famous among the feudal lords is simply the existence of Wei. Now Ch’in is attacking Wei, yet you show no pity for Wei in this emergency. If the Ch’in army should take Ta-liang and raze your ancestral temple to the ground, how could you face the world again?’ Before they had finished talking, the Prince changed colour and hastily gave orders to get the carriages ready for his return.

When the King of Wei and the Prince saw each other, they both wept, and the King gave him the seal of the generalissimo. In 247 B.C., the Prince sent messengers to all the other feudal lords, informing them of his appointment. On hearing this, they all sent generals with troops to help. The Prince, as Commander-in-Chief of the allied forces of five states, defeated the Ch’in army south of the Yellow River and drove the enemy out of the Han-ku Gate. The Ch’in troops dared not come out again, and the Prince’s heroic fame spread all over the empire.

The King of Ch’in then bribed a former retainer of Chin Pi’s with ten thousand catties of gold and made him slander the Prince before the King of Wei: ‘The Prince was an exile abroad for ten years. Now he is the generalissimo of Wei, and the generals from the other states are all under his command. The other feudal lords have only heard of the Prince but not the King of Wei. The Prince himself wants to take this opportunity to ascend the throne, and the other feudal lords, who fear his authority, will support him.’ Moreover, the King of Ch’in repeatedly sent messengers to Wei, pretending to have come to congratulate the new King and asking if the Prince had ascended the throne yet. The King of Wei, hearing such slander daily, could not help believing. Later, he ordered someone else to replace the Prince.

The Prince knew that he had been deprived of his power because of slander, so he asked for sick leave and refused to come to court. He had long drinking bouts with his guests at night, taking strong wine and dallying with many women. After indulging in wine, women, and song day and night for four years, he actually died of alcoholism. In that year (243 B.C.) the King of Wei also died. The King of Ch’in, on hearing of the Prince’s death, sent an army to invade Wei and occupied twenty towns, which formed the new Eastern Prefecture of Ch’in. Eighteen years later, Ch’in captured the King of Wei of that time and slaughtered the people of Ta-liang.

Ching K’o (ob. 227 B.C.), T’ien Kuang (ob. 232 B.C.), and Kao Chien-li (ob. c. 221 B.C.)

Ching K’o was a native of the state of Wey. He was fond of reading and swordsmanship, and offered his services to Prince Yuan of Wey, who did not make use of him. Later, when Ch’in invaded Wei (of which Prince Yuan of Wey had become a vassal) and established the Eastern Prefecture, Prince Yuan was forcibly moved to another place. (If Prince Yuan had made use of Ching K’o, he might have been able to save his country.)

Once, while travelling through Han-tan, Ching K’o quarrelled with another knight called Lu Kou-chien while playing backgammon. Lu scolded Ching angrily. Ching K’o said nothing and left.

After further travelling, Ching K’o arrived in the state of Yen, where he was commonly called Master Ching. He became very fond of a dog butcher and a musician named Kao Chien-li, who was an expert player of the zither (chu). Being addicted to the cup, Ching K’o drank daily with these two at the market-place. When they became high-spirited with wine, Kao Chien-li would play his zither, which Ching K’o would echo with singing. Thus they enjoyed themselves together. But soon they would start to weep.

1 I have spelt this name Wey to distinguish it from the larger state of Wei. The state of Wey was originally situated in modern Honan, later moved to Hopel.
2 See last paragraph.
3 The state of Yen occupied parts of modern Hopel, Manchuria, and northern Korea.
4 A string instrument that came into being about this time and apparently passed out of use not long afterwards. It is variously described as having 5, 13, or 21 strings, and was played with the left hand and a bamboo stick held in the right hand.