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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Commemorating a Failed Assassin: The Making of the Jing Ke Lore in Early China

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Abstract

Studies of the Jing Ke lore in early China have focused on three major texts: the "Yan ce" 燕策 (Stratagems of the Yan) in *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Stratagems of the Warring States), "Cike liezhuan" 刺客列傳 (The Biography of Assassins) in the *Shi ji* 史記 (Grand Archivist's Records), and *Yan Dan zi* 燕丹子 (Prince Dan of Yan). Most discussions have centered on the similarities and differences among the three accounts—e.g., how the main characters are depicted, and different interpretations of Jing Ke's motivations and Prince Dan's plot. However, a myriad of transmitted and excavated materials on the Jing Ke lore have not been sufficiently discussed in the context of the culture of early China. This article adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining literature, history, philosophy, fine arts, and archaeology, to examine Pre-Qin and Han dynasty accounts of the Jing Ke lore. In addition, this article comprehensively investigates the iconography of the Jing Ke lore found in burial paintings and *huaxiang shi* 畫像石 (pictorial stones) dating to the Han dynasty which have been found throughout China. It delves into the disparities between these visual representations and the records of the Jing Ke lore in transmitted texts and explains the likely underlying reasons behind these disparities. By analyzing both transmitted texts and excavated materials, this article traces the construction of this influential and controversial figure in early China, and in elite discourse as well as in folk culture and art, and in so doing provides a glimpse into the transformation of the socio-political, literary, and intellectual history of early China.

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I have translated all the primary sources quoted in this article to show my own interpretation of the original sources. There are existing English translations for some of the primary sources, and I consulted these published translations for my own translation.

Keywords: Jing Ke; the King of Qin (the First Emperor); assassination; transmitted texts; excavated materials; early reception

As an account of the attempt of a famous assassin on the life of an important ruler, "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" 荆軻刺秦王 (Jing Ke's assassination attempt on the King of Qin) has been discussed for millennia, in literature, history, philosophy, fine arts, and archeology. Even today, Jing Ke 荆軻 (d. 227 BCE) continues to be a relevant topic as is demonstrated by Mo Yan's 莫言 historical play *Women de Jing Ke* 我們的荆軻 (Our Jing Ke).[1] The influence of this event transcends national boundaries—it is also used as an example in comparative cultural studies. Jeremy Tanner, for instance, draws a parallel between the regicide cultures of ancient Greece and early China, using Harmodius (d. 514 BCE) and Aristogeiton (d. 514 BCE) as examples for the former,[2] and Jing Ke for the latter.[3] Both cases were early instances of tyrant assassinations that had far-reaching consequences. This article focuses on the making of the Jing Ke lore in early China. Scholars in early China adopted complex attitudes towards Jing Ke, and their preoccupation with the lore deserves deeper analysis. What did they focus on, and what do these various aspects reveal?

Yuri Pines has examined the reception of the Jing Ke lore in literature and history from the Warring States (403–221 BCE) period into the twenty-first century, focusing on the premodern era.[4] He argues that the image of Jing Ke in poetry tends to be positive and sympathetic, often representing his bravery, boldness, and loyalty, whereas by way of contrast, the Jing Ke lore in prose and especially in historical prose is largely critical and negative. Jing Ke's critics often questioned his swordsmanship and the assassination plan. They were also dubious of Crown Prince Dan of Yan's 燕太子丹 (d. 226 BCE) embrace of assassination, arguing that his use of the tactic reveals his short-sightedness and lack of strategic imagination. The political significance of Jing Ke's act was often condemned. Anthony J. Barbieri-Low's recent book on the First Emperor discusses the narration of the Jing Ke lore in the "Cike liezhuan" 刺客列傳

[1]For a detailed discussion of Mo Yan's play, see Yue Zhang, "Reconfiguring History through Literature—Cultural Memory and Mo Yan's Historical Play *Our Jing Ke*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 34.1 (2022), 97–127.

[2]Brave and fearless figures of Harmodius and Aristogeiton's assassination of Hipparchus (d. 514 BCE) eventually led to the overthrow of the Hippias (r. 527–510 BCE) rule. The assassination was largely perceived by the Athenians as a symbol of democracy. The statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton have been celebrated as symbols of the Greek democratic spirit.

[3]Jeremy Tanner, "Visual Art and Historical Representation in Ancient Greece and China," in *Ancient Greece and China Compared*, ed. G. E. R. Lloyd, Jingyi Jenny Zhao, and Qiaosheng Dong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 189–233, and Tanner, "Picturing History: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Tyrannicide in the Art of Classical Athens and Early Imperial China," in *How to Do Things with History: New Approaches to Ancient Greece*, eds. Danielle Allen, Paul Christesen, and Paul Millett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 263–312.

[4]Yuri Pines, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited," *Asia Major*, 21.2 (2008), 1–34. For the chronology of Chinese dynasties, this article follows Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

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(The Biography of Assassins) of the *Shi ji* alongside four paintings of the assassination attempt from early China.[5]

Scholarly works on the Jing Ke lore in early China have focused on three core texts: *The Shi ji* 史記 (Grand Archivist's Records), *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Stratagems of the Warring States), and *Yan Dan zi* 燕丹子 (Prince Dan of Yan). These texts offer insight into the transformation of his image, the various interpretations of his act, and the critique of Crown Prince Dan of Yan's planning.[6] This article builds on this previous research by further investigating the specific characteristics of the Jing Ke lore in early China as documented in various transmitted texts and excavated materials.[7] It delves into the large number of understudied early texts that include Jing Ke lore, such as *Beida jian* 北大簡 (Peking University Bamboo Strips), *Xinshu* 新書 (New Writings), *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Master of Huainan), various accounts of Jing Ke in addition to the "Cike liezhuan" in the *Shi ji*, *Xinxu* 新序 (New Prefaces), *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Discourses on Salt and Iron), *Fayan* 法言 (Exemplary Sayings), *Lunheng* 論衡 (Discourses in the Balance), *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 (Discourses of a Recluse), and *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Mores). These texts cite earlier versions of the story of Jing Ke, either directly quoting those stories or paraphrasing them, as examples to prove their arguments. Their accounts of Jing Ke were disseminated for various reasons and generated some new, unconventional narratives—generating new narratives was often the very reason Han scholars disseminated this lore. From the very beginning, different interpretations of the story of Jing Ke have been transmitted in different contexts, and these interpretations have interacted and hybridized with each other.

Along with these texts, this article also explores the iconography of Jing Ke found in such recently excavated objects as tomb paintings and *huaxiang shi* 畫像石 (pictorial stones) of the Han dynasty. The wide distribution of these objects—found in contemporary Shandong, Shaanxi, Jiangsu, Sichuan, and Zhejiang—provides evidence of the popular circulation of Jing Ke lore in early China. Analyzing transmitted texts alongside excavated materials, this article deepens our understanding of how the complex and controversial figure of Jing Ke was constructed in early China. And more importantly, this reception reveals the broader intellectual, historical, and literary context of the Western Han (202 BCE–8 CE) and Eastern Han (25–220 CE).

[5]Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022).

[6]For Chinese scholarship on the Jing Ke lore in the three major texts, see Zhang Haiming 張海明, "*Shi ji*· 'Jing Ke zhuan' yu *Zhanguo ce*· 'Yan taizi Dan zhi yu Qin' guanxi kaolun"《史記·荆軻傳》與《戰國策·燕太子丹質於秦》關係考論, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 28.1 (2013), 94–113; Zhang Haiming, "*Shi ji*· 'Jing Ke zhuan' yu *Yandan zi* bijiao lun—Jiantan *Yandan zi* de xiaoshuo wenti shuxing ji yiyi"《史記·荆軻傳》與《燕丹子》比較論——兼談《燕丹子》的小說文體屬性及意義, *Wenxue pinglun* 3 (2013), 152–63.

[7]In his work on Jing Ke reception in early China, Pines focuses on the "Cike liezhuan" of the *Shi ji* and the Wu Liang shrine. He also mentions the "Taizu xun" of the *Huainanzi* and the lost *Lieshi zhuan* in a footnote. See Pines, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited," *Asia Major* 21.2 (2008), 3–4, 6–8; and Chen Te 陳特, "Shishi·gushi·renwu—Tangqian Jing Ke gushi liuyan kaolun" 史事·故事·人物——唐前荆軻故事流衍考論, *Xinya xuebao* 36 (2019), 77–92.

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Different Accounts of the Jing Ke Lore in the *Shi ji* and Excavated Texts

Previous studies of the *Shi ji* highlight the image of Jing Ke presented in the "Cike liezhuan,"[8] which profiles five well-known assassins, ending with Jing Ke.[9] It narrates Jing Ke's early years in the state of Wei 衛, his encounters with Ge Nie 蓋聶 (fl. third century BCE) and Lu Goujian 魯句踐 (fl. third century BCE), and then Tian Guang's 田光 (fl. 230 BCE) recommendation of him to Crown Prince Dan of Yan. Jing Ke initially hesitated to accept the task, but Dan used money, women, and other gifts and favors to make Jing Ke feel indebted to him. Jing Ke finally agreed to conduct the assassination after he collected a poisoned dagger which he planned to use to assassinate the king, and two gifts he would use to entice the King of Qin to meet him in person—the head of the Qin traitor general Fan Wuqi 樊於期 (d. 227 BCE) and a map of the Dukang region of the state of Yan. Once in the Qin court, Jing Ke drew the dagger and attempted to capture the king alive. He failed and was instead executed. Despite Jing Ke's failure, "Cike liezhuan" highlights his bravery, integrity, and *yi* 義 (righteousness).

Yet "Cike liezhuan" is not the only time Jing Ke's assassination attempt is mentioned in the *Shi ji*. Other accounts in the *Shi ji* describe this momentous act, often highlighting the attitudes of the different states towards it. These diverse accounts center on three questions: first, whether the King of Qin knew about the assassination plot; second, what role the King of Yan played in the assassination process; and third, what we know about Qin Wuyang 秦舞陽 (d. 227 BCE) and Fan Wuqi.

In the "Cike liezhuan," the *Shi ji* does not mention what knowledge the King of Qin had of the plot. The "Chu shijia" 楚世家 (House of Chu) does not mention the king having any prior knowledge in its brief mention of the assassination: "In the first year of the reign of Fu Chu 負芻 (r. 228–223 BCE), Crown Prince Dan of Yan asked Jing Ke to assassinate the King of Qin" (王負芻元年，燕太子丹使荆軻刺秦王).[10] A similar description is provided in the Yan chronicle included in "Liuguo nianbiao" 六國年表 (The Chronicle of the Six States): "Crown Prince Dan of Yan sent Jing Ke to carry out

[8]"Cike liezhuan" has been a popular topic both for research and for university teaching. The section has been translated into English multiple times. See Burton Watson, *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 55–67; Cyril Birch, "Biographies of Ching K'o," in *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, vol. 1 (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 106–18; William Dolby and John Scott, *Sima Qian: War-Lords* (Edinburgh: Southside, 1974); Yang Hsien-yi 楊憲益 and Gladys Yang 戴乃迭, trans., *Selections from Records of the Historian* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1979), 392–402; Raymond Dawson, "An Assassination Attempt," in *The First Emperor: Selections from the Historical Records* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11–22; William H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China*, vol. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 325–33; and William H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China*, revised vol. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 604–21. For the methods of using the Jing Ke lore in university teaching, see Yue Zhang, "Teaching Classical Chinese Poetry through Reception Studies," *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 26.1 (2019), 87–92; Yue Zhang, "Bringing Traditional Chinese Culture to Life," *Education about Asia* 23.3 (2018), www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/bringing-traditional-chinese-culture-to-life/.

[9]After Jing Ke's failed assassination, his friend Gao Jianli 高漸離 (fl. 227 BCE) also tried and failed to assassinate the First Emperor to avenge Jing Ke. If we count Gao, there are six assassins in the biography.

[10]*Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 40.2091.

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the assassination of the King of Qin, and the Qin attacked us" (太子丹使荆軻刺秦王，秦伐我).[11] In the "Bai Qi Wang Jian liezhuan" 白起王翦列傳 (Biographies of Bai Qi and Wang Jian), Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) comments negatively on the incident but does not mention any awareness on the part of the king: "The next year (227 BCE), Yan assigned Jing Ke to murder the Qin king. The King of Qin sent Wang Jian to attack Yan" (明年， 燕使荆軻爲賊於秦， 秦王使王翦攻燕).[12] This narration uses the word "murder" 賊 to describe the assassination attempt, which is understandable because it is a biography of Qin's generals. The *Shi ji* contains several other Qin-oriented accounts of the act. The Qin chronicle, for example, appends the Qin rhetoric around Qin's punitive campaigns: "The prime minister, Wan, the imperial counsellor, Jie, and the commandant of justice, Si, all said, 'Your Majesty is now raising a righteous army, killing the brutal bandits, and pacifying the world'" (丞相綰、御史大夫劫、廷尉斯等皆曰：" ... ... 今陛下興義兵，誅殘賊，平定天下").[13] Sima Qian preserves the language used by the Qin officials, who call Qin's army "righteous" (*yi*) and the armies of the other states "bandits" (*zei*).

In contrast to these accounts, which do not mention whether the King of Qin was aware of the plot, other accounts highlight his awareness, although they do not provide further detail. The "Qin Shihuang benji" 秦始皇本紀 (Biography of Qin Shihuang) records that the king was alerted to the assassination: "The King of Qin became aware of it and ordered Jing Ke publicly dismembered" (秦王覺之，體解軻以徇).[14] The chronicle of Qin from the "Liuguo nianbiao" also documents the King of Qin becoming aware of the plot: "Crown Prince Dan of Yan sent Jing Ke to assassinate the King of Qin, who became aware of it" (燕太子使荆軻刺王，覺之).[15] These records indicate that the King of Qin knew about the conspiracy, although they do not indicate when the king became aware.

There are several possibilities for when the King of Qin became aware of the assassination plot. Tian Guang held secret conversations with Jing Ke and Prince Dan separately. After Tian spoke with Jing Ke, he committed suicide. At this point, the likelihood of the plan being leaked was minimal. Jing Ke's meeting with General Fan, who offered his head to facilitate Jing Ke's audience with the King of Qin, should also have remained confidential. In other words, it is unlikely that the plan would have been leaked before the farewell at the Yi River. Although there were not many people present at the farewell, there were of course far more people involved than in the previous secret contacts, increasing the possibility of a leak. After bidding farewell at the Yi River, Jing Ke traveled to the Qin state where he bribed Meng Jia 蒙嘉 (fl. 227 BCE) to secure a meeting with the King of Qin. It is conceivable that during his time in Qin, someone who was aware of Jing Ke's intentions might have informed the king and revealed the assassination plot. Moreover, it is plausible that during a routine inspection prior to Jing Ke's audience with the king, someone would have discovered his concealed dagger.

[11] *Shi ji*, 15.905.
[12] *Shi ji*, 73.2839.
[13] *Shi ji*, 6.304.
[14] *Shi ji*, 6.301.
[15] *Shi ji*, 15.905.

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If the aforementioned scenarios had occurred, it would imply that Jing Ke's assassination attempt might not have actually taken place at the Qin court, in which case it is plausible that the King of Qin fabricated the story to justify his subsequent military campaign against Yan. However, the likelihood of the event not occurring is low. As previously mentioned, the assassination of the King of Qin is documented in various biographies in the *Shi ji*, from the perspective of Qin as well as from the perspectives of other states. "Cike liezhuan" specifically names as a source Xia Wuju's eyewitness account, which was then told to Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200–121 BCE) and Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE). Shortly after Jing Ke's attack on the King of Qin, the magistrate of Lingling in Qin submitted a memorial that alluded to Jing Ke. In the early years of the Western Han, scholars such as Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) and Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE) discussed this event and advanced their own arguments about the incident. These accounts, which will be discussed fully later in this article, provide substantial evidence of the existence of Jing Ke's assassination attempt.

Another scenario regarding the King of Qin's awareness of the assassination was that he was about to be assassinated upon noticing the dagger concealed within the map when Jing Ke unfolded it. If this is the case, this account aligns with the "Cike liezhuan." Compared with the brief records in other biographies, the "Cike liezhuan" explores in detail the king's reaction of panic and subsequent flight to save himself. Accounts and depictions of the King of Qin realizing that he was about to be assassinated serve to highlight his perceptiveness and vigilance, portraying him in a positive light. According to this version of events, despite the meticulous planning by Prince Dan and Jing Ke, the plot did not elude the comprehension of the King of Qin. These accounts minimize the clumsiness and panic that characterize the attempted assassination as portrayed in the "Cike liezhuan."

The "Qin Shihuang benji" emphasizes the intimidating effect of the king, the ultimate victor of the contentions between the Central States, on his rivals. For example, it states, "The Han king was afraid of the Qin" (韓王患之),[16] and "Crown Prince Dan of Yan feared the arrival of Qin troops in his state, and he was so filled with dread that he sent Jing Ke to assassinate the Qin king" (燕太子丹患秦兵至國，恐，使荆軻刺秦王).[17] The use of the words "huan" 患 and "kong" 恐 emphasizes the emotional impact of the intimidating power of Qin. Compared with these brief accounts, the "Yan Shaogong shijia" 燕召公世家 (House of Yan Shaogong) instead highlights the context and process of the assassination:

> 燕見秦且滅六國，秦兵臨易水，禍且至燕。太子丹陰養壯士二十人，使荆軻獻督亢地圖於秦，因襲刺秦王。秦王覺，殺軻，使將軍王翦擊燕。
>
> The state of Yan saw that Qin was soon about to annex the six states. When the Qin army approached the Yi River, and disaster was about to befall Yan, Crown Prince Dan of Yan nurtured twenty brave men in secret. Jing Ke presented the map of Dukang to Qin, which gave him the opportunity to assassinate the King

[16] *Shi ji*, 6.297.
[17] *Shi ji*, 6.301.

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> of Qin. The King of Qin became aware of this and killed Jing Ke and ordered General Wang Jian to attack Yan.[18]

This quote provides the context of Jing Ke's assassination attempt—the destruction of Zhao and the impending invasion of Yan—and mentions the King of Qin's knowledge of the plot. Similar accounts also occur in "Wei shijia" 魏世家 (House of Wei) and "Tian Jingzhong Wan shijia" 田敬仲完世家 (House of Tian Jingzhong). The accounts of the assassination provided in the *Shi ji* are therefore divided on whether the King of Qin was aware of the plot. These accounts also reflect the personality of Crown Prince Dan in times of turmoil and emergency. The bamboo-strip texts acquired by Peking University records that "Dan and Hou Sheng were both disorganized and befuddled" 丹勝誤亂.[19] Crown Prince Dan hired Jing Ke to assassinate the King of Qin but failed, and although Dan was later killed by the King of Yan, the Qin state nevertheless proceeded to invade and annex Yan. Hou Sheng 后勝 (fl. 221 BCE), the prime minister of the Qi state, was generously bribed by Qin, so he persuaded the King Jian of Qi 齊王建 (r. 264–221 BCE) to not help the other endangered states, which eventually led to the downfall of the Qi state. Although the primary purpose of the passage containing the quote was to help teach characters, owing to its historical allusions it advances multiple pedagogical purposes—teaching history as well as teaching characters.

Another central question around the assassination as presented in the *Shi ji* is about the role of King Xi of Yan 燕王喜 (r. 254–222 BCE). King Xi was the ultimate authority in Yan, but numerous accounts of the assassination, including the "Cike liezhuan" of the *Shi ji*, the Yan account in the *Zhanguo ce*,[20] and *Yan Danzi*, only mention Crown Prince Dan of Yan and do not discuss any role the king may have played. However, other accounts in the *Shi ji* mention the king briefly. "Qin Shihuang benji" mentions the role the King of Yan played in preparing the assassination: "The King of Yan was dazed and confused, so Crown Prince Dan of Yan secretly sent Jing Ke to be an assassin" (燕王昏亂，其太子丹乃陰令荆軻爲賊).[21] This account blames the king's incompetence for Prince Dan's decision to hire an assassin. This description is in line with other depictions of King Xi. For example, before the assassination, despite the protests of his generals, King Xi of Yan took advantage of the decline of Zhao's military power after the Battle of Changping to renege on the alliance between the two states and attack Zhao. This attack was repelled by Zhao's general Lian Po 廉頗 (fl. 283 BCE). King Xi then took the advice of Ju Xin 劇辛 (d. 243 BCE) and attacked Zhao again after Lian Po left the state, and he was once again defeated.

[18]*Shi ji*, 34.1888.

[19]Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiu suo 北京大學出土文獻研究所, ed., *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (yi)* 北京大學藏西漢竹書 (壹) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2015), 77. The explanation of this sentence follows Wu Yiqiang 吳毅強, "Beida jian 'Cang Jie pian' 'Dan Sheng wuluan' jie" 北大簡《蒼頡篇》"丹勝誤亂"解, *Chutu wenxian* 2 (2018), 285–92. For a detailed introduction to the bamboo-strip texts acquired by Peking University, see Christopher J. Foster, "Introduction to the Peking University Han Bamboo Strips: On the Authentication and Study of Purchased Manuscripts," *Early China* 40 (2017), 167–239.

[20]For the English translation of *Zhanguo ce*, see J. I. Crump, Jr., *Chan-Kuo Ts'e* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). The revised edition was published by Center for Chinese Studies of the University of Michigan in 1996.

[21]*Shi ji*, 6.303.

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These important historical events demonstrate the incompetence of the Yan king, which is further reflected in his decision to allow Crown Prince Dan to carry out his plans without regard for the consequences.

Another account of the King of Yan can be found in the "Meng Tian liezhuan" 蒙恬列傳 (Biography of Meng Tian). In the biography, the Qin prince Ziying 子嬰 (d. 206 BCE) uses the example of the king to argue that Meng Tian (ca. 259–210 BCE) should not be executed:

> 燕王喜陰用荊軻之謀而倍秦之約 … … 臣聞輕慮者不可以治國，獨智者不可以存君。誅殺忠臣而立無節行之人，是內使羣臣不相信而外使鬬士之意離也，臣竊以爲不可。
>
> King Xi of Yan secretly adopted Jing Ke's plan and betrayed Qin's pact …. I heard that a person who thinks rashly cannot administer the state, and that a person who is obstinate and self-opinionated cannot protect the ruler. To kill loyal ministers and appoint men without high moral principles or conduct is to make the ministers distrust each other within the court and discourage the warriors outside of it. In my opinion, this cannot be done.[22]

Ziying blames the king's rash employment of the assassin for the destruction of his state and his family, drawing a direct connection between the two figures. Ziying's admonition otherwise echoes the rhetoric of Qin, justifying the state's military aggression by saying that the other states "betrayed their covenant with Qin" (倍秦之約).[23] After the unification of the six states, the First Emperor toured his domain several times and used stone inscriptions to celebrate his "righteousness" and condemn the other states as outlaws. The "Yan Shaogong shijia" of the *Shi ji* also criticizes the King of Yan, holding him accountable for refusing to listen to the advice of General Jiang Qu 將渠 (fl. 251 BCE), who advised him not to betray Zhao.[24]

The bamboo-strip texts acquired by Peking University provide a similar account. The "Zhao Zheng Shu" 趙正書 (Documents of Zhao Zheng) claims that Ziying does not agree with the newly established ruler Huhai's 胡亥 (230–207 BCE) plan to kill Fushu 扶蘇 (d. 210 BCE) and Meng Tian, and to conquer the untamed land. To remonstrate with Huhai, Ziying uses historical examples from the states of Zhao, Yan, and Qi to make a convincing argument that the rulers of these states thoughtlessly accepted their ministers' suggestions, which led to the demise of their respective states. One of these examples is, "Xi, the King of Yan adopted Jing Ke's plan and betrayed Qin's pact" (燕王喜而軻 (軻) 之謀而倍 (背) 秦之約).[25] As mentioned, this account largely concurs with that of the *Shi ji.* The major difference between the two accounts is how each explains Huhai's ascendance to the throne. The *Shi ji* records that when

[22] *Shi ji*, 88.3116.

[23] *Shi ji*, 88.3116.

[24] *Shi ji*, 34.1886–87.

[25] Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiu suo 北京大學出土文獻研究所, ed., *Beijing daxue cang Xi Han zhushu (san)* 北京大學藏西漢竹書 (叁) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2015), 191. The translation of the character *er* 而 meaning "to adopt" follows Wang Tingbin 王挺斌, "Du Beida jian lingshi" 讀北大簡零拾, *Chutu wenxian* 1 (2016), 202.

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the First Emperor passed away, Huhai became the new emperor due to the efforts of the treacherous and cunning ministers Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 BCE) and Zhao Gao 趙高 (d. 207 BCE), while the bamboo-strip texts state that the First Emperor agreed to let Huhai accede to the throne while on his deathbed. All the evidence presented above suggests that different regional versions of the story of Jing Ke emerged in the process of its transmission, which enriches our understanding of the development of the lore.

The third major difference between the accounts of the assassination in the *Shi ji* concerns the inclusion or omission of details on other members of the conspiracy, such as Qin Wuyang and Fan Wuqi. The "Cike liezhuan," provides no background on Qin Wuyang. He only appears when Crown Prince Dan pressures Jing Ke into carrying out the assassination. The "Xiongnu liezhuan" 匈奴列傳 (Biography of the Xiongnu) provides more details on who Qin was: "Yan had a worthy general, Qin Kai, who was sent to the Hu as a hostage. The Hu trusted him deeply. After he returned to his state, he raided, defeated, and expelled the Eastern Hu, who retreated more than a thousand *li*. Qin Wuyang, who accompanied Jing Ke to assassinate the Qin king, was Qin Kai's grandson" (燕有賢將秦開，爲質於胡，胡甚信之。歸而襲破走東胡，東胡卻千餘里。與荆軻刺秦王秦舞陽者，開之孫也).[26] The fact that Qin Wuyang, with his distinguished martial background, was also frightened at the Qin court highlights Jing Ke's courage. With respect to Fan Wuqi, more details are provided in the "Lu Zhonglian Zou Yang liezhuan" 魯仲連鄒陽列傳 (Biographies of Lu Zhonglian and Zou Yang). These biographies describe Fan's participation in the plot and dedication to Jing Ke as conforming to the saying: "There are those whose heads turn white, but they still treat each other as if they had just met, and those whose canopies meet for the first time, but it is as if they are old friends" (有白頭如新，傾蓋如故).[27] Fan's fidelity led him to sacrifice himself for Jing Ke's mission. The *Shi ji* also presents Zou Yang's 鄒陽 (ca. 206–129 BCE) analysis of Fan's deeds:

> 昔樊於期逃秦之燕，藉荆軻首以奉丹之事 … … 夫王奢、樊於期非新於齊、秦而故於燕、魏也，所以去二國死兩君者，行合於志而慕義無窮也。
>
> In the past, Fan Wuqi fled Qin and went to Yan. He presented his head to Jing Ke to further Prince Dan's plot .... It is not because Wang She and Fan Quqi were newly acquainted with Qi and Qin and deeply familiar with Yan and Wei" [that they undertook these actions]. The reason that they left Qi and Qin and laid down their life for the rulers of Yan and Wei was that their behavior matched their intentions, and they had an infinite admiration for righteousness.[28]

The description here portrays Fan as righteous. Zou Yang uses Fan's example to emphasize the righteousness of "a man who dies for his soulmate" (士爲知己者死), with the aim of advising King Xiao of Liang 梁孝王 (d. 144 BCE) not to listen to the

[26] *Shi ji*, 110.3490.
[27] *Shi ji*, 83.2995.
[28] *Shi ji*, 83.2995.

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slander of lesser men and recognize Zou's loyalty.[29] Zou's praise of Fan's trust in Jing Ke demonstrates that he regarded Jing Ke's assassination attempt as a moral and righteous act.

It is typical for the *Shi ji* to record many different accounts of the same event. Sima Tan 司馬談 (ca. 169–110 BCE) and Sima Qian had access to numerous sources—the many old records stored in the imperial archives as well as orally transmitted accounts. The different accounts likely reflect the differences among the primary sources, which were written, compiled, or orally transmitted according to the perspectives of each of the different states and individuals. These small nuances matter in understanding and interpreting Jing Ke's lore. After the assassination took place, the news was spread and conveyed by many people in different regions. In its transmission, new details were probably added to embellish either the bravery of Jing Ke or the majesty of the King of Qin. For example, it makes sense that accounts based on records compiled by Qin adhere to a propagandistic Qin image of the extraordinary perceptiveness of the king.

The different accounts in the *Shi ji* of Jing Ke's attempted assassination represent different voices within a complex history. Although these accounts are brief, they are an essential supplement to the detailed version presented in the "Cike liezhuan." As will be discussed below, Han scholars would add even more complexity, alluding to, quoting, or directly discussing the Jing Ke lore in ways that would reflect its mixed reception in early Chinese culture.

Negative Reception of the Jing Ke Lore

The negative reception of the Jing Ke lore was produced by those Western Han scholars who were mostly concerned with *li* 禮 (ritual propriety). Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) used the example of Jing Ke to argue for limiting the power of local feudal lords, who might otherwise cultivate and use agents like Jing Ke to eschew ritual propriety and threaten the central government. Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE) also critiqued Jing Ke from the perspective of ritual propriety. He pointed out how the "Yishui ge" 易水歌 (Song of the Yi River), sung by Jing Ke as he prepared to assassinate the king, deviates from musical norms, and uses this deviation to explicate his understanding of the relationship of music to governance. Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) was the most vehement of Jing Ke's critics, because Jing Ke disobeyed ritual propriety and did not fit Yang's conceptions of bravery and righteousness.

Juan 4 of Jia Yi's political essays, *Xinshu* 新書 (New Writings), expresses his disapproval of the enfeoffment of the four sons of Liu Chang 劉長, the King of Huainan 淮南王 (198–174 BCE).[30] Although Liu rebelled against the Han court,

[29]For a recent study of Zou Yang's rhetoric, see Wang Chunhong 汪春泓, "Wen, bi zhi bian: Zou Yang yu 'wen' faren zhi gongji—guanyu 'Yuzhong shangshu' zhi yipie" 文、筆之辨：鄒陽於"文"發軔之功績——關於"獄中上書"之一瞥, *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* 43. 2 (2023), 140–50.

[30]For a discussion of the authenticity and sources of the *Xinshu*, see Wang Zhouming 王洲明, "*Xinshu* fei weishu kao"《新書》非偽書考, *Wenxue yichan* 2 (1982), 17–28; and Yu Jianping 余建平, "Jia Yi zouyi de wenben xingtai yu wenxian yiyi—Jianlun *Xinshu, Han shu*· 'Jia Yi zhuan,' yu *Jia Yi ji* de cailiao laiyuan" 賈誼奏議的文本形態與文獻意義——兼論《新書》《漢書·賈誼傳》與《賈誼集》的材料來源, *Wenxue yichan* 3 (2018), 27–36. For a thorough discussion of the *Xinshu* in English, see Rune Svarverud, *Methods of the Way: Early Chinese Ethical Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

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Emperor Wen 漢文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE) planned to allow Liu's four sons to remain feudal lords.[31] Jia argued that even dividing their fief among four sons would not prevent them from banding together against the emperor: "Although the land is divided into four areas, the four enfeoffed sons are of one mind, without any differences between them" (雖割而爲四，四子一心未異也).[32] If the feudal lords joined forces, they would pose a major threat to central authority. Jia then assesses various plots against established authority. He argues that Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (559–484 BCE) and Baigong Sheng 白公勝 (d. 479 BCE) possessed the manpower and military assistance necessary for successful rebellion. Wu Zixu successfully challenged the power of Chu by persuading the state of Wu to ally with the states of Cai and Tang and fight Chu. Likewise, Baigong Sheng led the Chu army to defeat the Wu invasion, and later asked for support to maintain his army, which he then used to rebel against Chu. Wu and Baigong achieved their goals by making use of their state's manpower and military advantages. Plots that rely on lone assassins require financial resources. Jia Yi attributes the failure of the assassin Yurang 豫讓 (fl. 453 BCE) to "a lack of resources" (資力少也).[33] The wealth of Helü 闔閭 (537–496 BCE) and Crown Prince Dan of Yan laid the foundation for them to send assassins to carry out their missions. These logistical considerations form the context of Jia Yi's admonition:

> 今陛下將尊不億之人，予之衆，積之財，此非有白公、子胥之報於廣都之中者，即疑有鱄諸、荆軻起兩柱之間，其策安便哉？此所謂假賊兵、爲虎翼者也。願陛下留意計之。
>
> Now, Your Majesty is about to exalt those who are unfathomable, give them people, and allow them to accumulate wealth. The result cannot be other than avengers like Bai Gong and Zixu appearing in the cities, or perhaps Zhuan Zhu and Jing Ke emerging from between the pillars of the royal court. What are the benefits of such decisions? This is what is called "lending weapons to bandits and giving wings to tigers." I hope that Your Majesty will reconsider and reassess this matter.[34]

Jia Yi cites Jing Ke as an example of how people without righteousness and ritual propriety, if permitted to retain their estates, could use their resources to subvert the government. Jia advocated learning from the fall of Qin to increase centralization and weaken the power of feudal states, which had become more powerful after the implementation of the feudal system in the early Han Dynasty. Jing Ke was useful to Jia Yi as an example of the problem of the relationship between the central and local governments. In the view of Han scholars like Jia Yi who disapproved of Jing Ke, his assassination of the King of Qin was an act of violence against ritual propriety, and therefore could not be considered brave and righteousness. Their grand narrative of

[31]*Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 48.2263.

[32]Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 and Zhong Xia 鍾夏, eds., *Xinshu jiaozhu* 新書校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 4.157.

[33]Yan and Zhong, *Xinshu jiaozhu*, 4.157.

[34]Yan and Zhong, *Xinshu jiaozhu*, 4.157.

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unification had no place for assassins like Jing Ke. In any case, Emperor Wen did not take Jia Yi's advice, and allowed Liu Chang's sons to retain their position.

Interestingly, the next case of citation is that of Liu Chang's eldest son, Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE), the King of Huainan, who compiled the *Huainanzi* together with his guests. Liu An was an adherent of Huang Lao Daoism, an erudite man, and a devoted zither player,[35] which may help explain why music is key to the political philosophy of the *Huainanzi*. Liu An felt that music played an important role in educating people and influencing politics, and one of Liu An's main purposes in compiling the *Huainanzi* was producing a guide for governance: "For this reason, I compiled twenty chapters to investigate the principles of heaven and earth, connect human affairs, and complete the Dao of becoming an emperor and a king" (故著書二十篇，則天地之理究矣，人間之事接矣，帝王之道備矣).[36] "Taizu xun" 泰族訓 (The Exalted Lineage) chapter of this book discusses the Jing Ke lore. Liu An asserts that the farewell music played for Jing Ke at the Yi River was not elegant:

> 荆軻西刺秦王，高漸離、宋意爲擊筑，而謌於易水之上，聞者莫不瞋目裂眦，髮植穿冠。因以此聲爲樂而入宗廟，豈古之所謂樂哉！
>
> When Jing Ke went west to assassinate the Qin king, Gao Jianli 高漸離 (fl. 226 BCE) and Song Yi 宋意 (fl. 227 BCE) struck the *zhu* for him,[37] singing on the shore of the Yi River. The people who listened to it widened their eyes and their hair stood straight up, piercing their hats.[38] Thus, if this were the kind of song sung in the ancestral halls, how could it be called music by the ancients?[39]

The noise of the "Yishui ge" offended Liu's tranquil sensibilities.[40] Liu rejected sophistry and advocated the pursuit of a pure heart freed from desire. The dominance of Huang Lao thought in the early Han, which combined pragmatism with respect to worldly affairs and an emphasis on rest and cultivation, proved a hostile environment for the lore of Jing Ke's assassination attempt. Liu argued that Jing Ke's song at the bank of the Yi River did not follow ritual propriety. It was inelegant, unrestrained, and thus inappropriate.

The most vehement criticism of Jing Ke in early China was offered by Yang Xiong. Yang believed that many ideals were misunderstood in his time, and to resolve

[35]*Shi ji*, 118.3746.

[36]He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 21.1454.

[37]For an introduction to the ancient Chinese musical instrument *zhu*, see Feng Jiexuan 馮潔軒, "Zhongguo zuizao de laxian yueqi 'zhu' kao (shang)" 中國最早的拉絃樂器 "筑" 考（上), *Yinyue yanjiu* 1 (2000), 15–21; and Feng Jiexuan, "Zhongguo zuizao de laxian yueqi 'zhu' kao (xia)" 中國最早的拉絃樂器 "筑" 考（下), *Yinyue yanjiu* 2 (2000), 54–60.

[38]This is an exaggerated metaphor meant to demonstrate their passion.

[39]He, *Huainanzi jishi*, 20.1425–1426. My English translation adapts that of John S. Major, Sarah A. Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, and Harold D. Roth, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 834.

[40]For a detailed discussion of the relationship between music and politics in the *Huainanzi*, see Zhao Weimin 趙爲民, "*Huainanzi* yinyue meixue sixiang chutan" 《淮南子》音樂美學思想初探, *Zhongguo yinyue xue* 3 (1990), 90–98; and Avital H. Rom, "Echoing Rulership—Understanding Musical References in the *Huainanzi*," *Early China* 40 (2017), 125–65.

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these misunderstandings, he composed a series of philosophical anecdotes and aphorisms, entitled *Exemplary Sayings* (*Fayan* 法言), which imitated the *Analects of Confucius* in form.[41] Through this imitation, Yang aimed to demonstrate his superb rhetorical skills and outstanding command of Ru 儒 thought.[42] In this book, Yang unequivocally condemns Jing Ke in the following dialogue, "Someone asked about 'bravery'. Yang said, 'It is Ke'. That person asked, 'which Ke do you refer to?' Yang replied, 'The Ke whom I mentioned is Meng Ke. As for Jing Ke, gentlemen regard him as a violent criminal'" (或問"勇"。曰："軻也。"曰："何軻也？"曰："軻也者，謂孟軻也。若荆軻，君子盜諸。").[43] Discussing the value of bravery, Yang initially says "Ke," but later clarifies that Ke here refers to Meng Ke (Mengzi) 孟軻 (372–289 BCE) rather than Jing Ke. Yang contrasts Jing Ke's courage with that of Mengzi: "He was courageous in righteousness and resolute in virtue. He did not change his mind because of poverty or wealth, eminence or disgrace, or matters of life or death. When it comes to bravery, he is close to it." (勇於義而果於德，不以貧富、貴賤、死生動其心，於勇也，其庶乎).[44] Yang Xiong's compliment of Mengzi's courage emphasizes his righteousness.

Yang Xiong contrasts the stories of Yao Li 要離 (d. 513 BCE) and Nie Zheng 聶政 (d. 397 BCE) with that of Jing Ke in his efforts to delineate what he views as righteousness. He argues that Jing Ke could not be viewed as a righteous man because he was doing a personal favor for Crown Prince Dan of Yan: "[Jing Ke] carried the head of Fan Wuqi and the map of Dukang into unpredictable Qin for the sake of Prince Dan. This is indeed formidable among assassins, but how could it be called righteousness?" (爲丹奉於期之首、燕督亢之圖，入不測之秦，實刺客之靡也，焉可謂之義也?).[45] Yang Xiong claims that Jing Ke acted courageously only because he received many gifts from Prince Dan, when true courage, like that of Mengzi, is in accordance with morality: "A gentleman attaches supreme importance to righteousness. A gentleman who has courage without righteousness is disordered; a villain who has courage without righteousness is a thief." (君子義以爲上，君子有勇而無義爲亂，小人有勇而無義爲盜).[46] In addition, courage is also defined by restraint. Scholars like Mengzi opposed "small courage" (小勇): "The king should not invite small courage. The man with the sword looks around and says: 'He dares to take me on?' This foolhardiness only suffices to face one man. The king should enlarge it" (王請無好小勇。夫撫劍疾視曰: "彼惡敢當我哉!" 此匹夫之勇，敵一人者也。王請大之!).[47]

[41]For a complete translation of *Fayan*, see Michael Nylan, *Exemplary Figures/Fayan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013). David R. Knechtges is a prolific scholar of Yang Xiong and particularly his rhapsodies. See "Yang Shyong, the Fuh, and Hann Rhetoric," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Washington, 1968); *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.–A.D. 18)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); and *The Han shu Biography of Yang Xiong (53 B.C.–A.D. 18)* (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1982).

[42]Nylan, *Exemplary Figures*, xii.

[43]Wang Rongbao 汪榮寶 and Chen Zhongfu 陳仲夫, eds., *Fayan yishu* 法言義疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 16.419.

[44]Wang and Chen, *Fayan yishu*, 16.419.

[45]Wang and Chen, *Fayan yishu*, 16.437.

[46]Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋, ed. Cheng Junying 程俊英 and Jiang Jianyuan 蔣見元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 35.1241.

[47]Jiao Xun 焦循 and Shen Wenzhuo 沈文倬, annot., *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 4.114.

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Elsewhere Mengzi writes: "A man who is brave and fierce will endanger his parents, and this is the fifth way of being unfilial" (好勇鬬很，以危父母，五不孝也).[48] Yang takes up Mengzi's argument and praises restrained, moral courage, but not bloodthirsty and unrighteous bravado. The failure of the assassination and the destruction of the Yan state could not be considered courageous. The commentary Li Gui 李軌 (fl. 317) offers on the line cited above is as follows: "The reasons why these three men died were in no case owing to difficulties faced by their rulers or their parents. The gentleman does not pursue an unrighteous righteousness" (三士所死，皆非君親之難也。非義之義，君子不爲也).[49] This comment emphasizes that assassination cannot be pursued, because it is not for the good of a ruler or his parents. Yang Xiong's understanding of benevolence and virtue cannot support and interpretation of Jing Ke's acts as righteous.

Yang Xiong equated Jing Ke's actions to thievery, believing these actions to be just as lacking in honor and integrity. He could not tolerate stealthy behavior. Yang was aligned with the school of *guwen jing* 古文經 (ancient script classics) and opposed Dong Zhongshu's doctrine of the correlation between heaven and man. He sought to revive traditional studies of Kongzi and Mengzi and saw himself as the inheritor of their wisdom; his *Fayan* even imitates the style of the *Lunyu*. He held Mengzi in high regard and extensively praised his righteousness and virtue. By way of contrast, Yang Xiong held a mixed attitude towards Sima Qian. Yang applauded Sima Qian's achievements in historiography and his talent in recording historical events, but he criticized certain biographies in the *Shi ji* for what he saw as their oddities and trivialities, including the "Cike liezhuan."[50] Yang likely objected to the accounts of the assassins in part because these accounts were sourced from Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong, whose ideas clashed with Yang's own. As a result, Yang denigrated Jing Ke's assassination attempt in his *Fayan*.

The Western Han scholars above who criticize Jing Ke in their political and philosophical essays value ritual propriety and righteousness. Viewing these as imperative to allow the economy and society to recover from chaotic rebellions and wars, they opposed behavior like Jing Ke's which challenges centralized authority. Jia Yi believed that local power should not be stronger than that of the central government and should be constantly curtailed to prevent violent assassinations and plots launched by such figures as Yurang, Wu Zixu, Baigong Sheng, and Jing Ke. In Jia's view, power should be concentrated in the center for good governance. His emphasis on the consolidation and strengthening of centralized power and curtailing the power of feudal lords was due to the hierarchical principles of ritual propriety, whereby power and resources should be allocated according to hierarchy in order to prevent those in inferior positions from overstepping the bounds of their authority and plotting against the government.[51]

[48]Jiao and Shen, *Mengzi zhengyi*, 17.599.

[49]Wang and Chen, *Fayan yishu*, 16.437.

[50]Shi Ding 施丁, "Yang Xiong ping Sima Qian zhi yiyi" 揚雄評司馬遷之意義, *Qiushi xuekan* 4 (2007): 128–34.

[51]For more on Jia Yi's understanding of ritual propriety, see Charles Sanft, "Rituals that Don't Reach, Punishments that Don't Impugn: Jia Yi on the Exclusions from Punishment and Ritual," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125.1 (2005), 31–44; Mark Csikszentmihalyi, ed. and trans., *Readings in Han Chinese Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 35–37; Liu Yongyan 劉永豔 and Zhen Jinhui 甄金輝, "Jia Yi

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Liu An focused on the relationship between music and governance, arguing that harmonious and elegant music is necessary for good governance, and the music of bidding farewell to Jing Ke at the Yi River was violent and powerful, inspiring improper conduct. Liu's critique is based on evaluating music according to the orderliness emphasized by ritual propriety, which was generally held to correspond to social stability. In his view, Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate the King of Qin was an egregious event that violated the hierarchical order and was not in line with the morality and legacy of previous kings and rulers.

Inheriting the tradition from Kongzi and Mengzi, Yang Xiong opposed the excessive pursuit of power, and asserted that Jing Ke's crime was the use of power for revenge and personal gain. Yang Xiong upholds the view of benevolence and righteousness developed by Mengzi, who believes that ritual propriety is the form of benevolence and righteousness, and that benevolence and righteousness are the basis of ritual propriety.[52] In Yang's opinion, because Jing Ke was treated well by Prince Dan, he attempted to assassinate the King of Qin without thinking of the risks for his family. Ultimately, both his family and the assassination attempt were doomed. Yang compares Jing Ke's actions with such unrighteous deeds as Yao Li burning his wife and son and Nie Zheng sacrificing his sister.[53] All the scholars cited above therefore understood ritual propriety and righteousness, and condemned Jing Ke's behavior as lawless violence.

Positive Reception of the Jing Ke Lore

While some Han scholars used Jing Ke as a negative example, other Han scholars identified positive aspects of the Jing Ke tradition. Although Jing Ke's assassination attempt failed, some Han scholars commemorated him. Zou Yang praised Jing Ke's loyalty to persuade King Xiao of Liang for the sincerity of his advice. The story was recounted in the *Shi ji* and recounted again by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE) in his *Xinxu* 新序 (New Preface). Mei Sheng 枚乘 (ca. 210–ca. 138 BCE) adopted the Jing Ke allusion to admonish Liu Bi 劉濞 (r. 196–154 BCE), the King of Wu not to rebel against central authority. Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–118 BCE) and other scholars composed works to eulogize Jing Ke. Jing Ke's most important defense in this era was made by Sima Qian who praised Jing Ke for his conscience and good intentions at the end of the "Cike liezhuan," which ensured that his fame and reputation would be transmitted to future generations. Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 97 CE) and Wang Fu 王符 (ca. 85–ca. 163) echoed Sima Qian and celebrated Jing Ke's loyalty and righteousness.[54]

lizhi sixiang tanwei" 賈誼禮治思想探微, *Hebei daxue xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 4 (2007), 90–93; and Charles Sanft, "Jia Yi on the Management of the Populace," *Asia Major* 29.2 (2016), 47–71.

[52]Jin Zhengkun 金正昆 and Zhang Chunyu 張春雨, "Lun Mengzi zhi 'li'" 論孟子之"禮," *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 40.3 (2020), 234–41.

[53]Wang and Chen, *Fayan yishu*, 16.437.

[54]In discussing Wang Chong's adoption of the Jing Ke lore in the *Lunheng*, Barbieri-Low notes how Wang Chong comments on the execution of Jing Ke's entire village by the King of Qin and the depth of Jing Ke's thrown dagger into the bronze pillar. See Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China*, 134–35. This article discusses these two details alongside Wang's praise of Jing Ke's intention and righteousness, and Gao Jianli's attempts to avenge Jing Ke by assassinating the First Emperor.

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The first extant appearance of the Zou Yang story is in the "Lu Zhonglian and Zou Yang liezhuan" in the *Shi ji*. Zou Yang was unjustly imprisoned. In his letter to King Xiao of Liang asking for pardon, he mentions Jing Ke's righteousness and loyalty: "In the past, Jing Ke admired Crown Prince Dan of Yan for his righteousness, which caused the white rainbow to cross the sun. The prince doubted him." (昔者荆軻慕燕丹之義，白虹貫日，太子畏之).[55] The "white rainbow crossing the sun" is an inauspicious sign that implies a failed endeavor. Zou Yang compared himself to Jing Ke and asked King Xiao of Liang to trust his loyalty: "Today I was fully loyal with all my heart. I spoke all my opinions without reservation, hoping that the king would accept them. Those officials on your left and right sides did not understand me, and handed me over to the jail for interrogation, causing the world to suspect me" (今臣盡忠竭誠，畢議願知，左右不明，卒從吏訊，爲世所疑).[56] He again cites Jing Ke to explain his awkward situation: "It was as if Jing Ke and Master Wei were reborn, but the kings of Yan and Qin were still unable to understand. I hope the king will carefully examine this" (是使荆軻、衛先生復起，而燕、秦不悟也。願大王孰察之).[57] Zou used Jing Ke to defend himself and persuade King Xiao of Liang not to believe the words of villains. The account of Zou Yang connects the Jing Ke lore with the *baihong guanri* ("white rainbow crossing the sun") phenomenon, which adds a legendary dimension to the lore.[58] Zou's comments on Jing Ke have long been of interest to scholars and even Sima's near contemporaries. This story is also recorded in the *Xinxu*, compiled by Liu Xiang, is a collection of historical examples of the relationship between the ruler and his ministers, and draws materials from previous text.[59] It is likely that the Zou Yang passage in the *Xinxu* either draws directly from the *Shi ji* or the *Xinxu* and *Shi ji* both draw from an earlier text.[60]

Before Zou Yang served Liu Wu 劉武 (r. 168–144 BCE), the King of Liang, he served the King of Wu together with Mei Sheng. Because they were both intelligent and good at witty ripostes, literary historians have referred to them together as "Zou Mei."[61] Mei Sheng also employed an allusion to Jing Ke. When Liu Bi, the King of Wu, entertained thoughts of rebellion, Mei wrote a letter in an attempt to dissuade him. However, the King of Wu disregarded the advice, and rebelled against the Han central court on the pretext of purging lesser men like Chao Chuo 晁錯 (ca. 200–154 BCE) who had gathered around the ruler. The Han court was intimidated by the actions of the King of Wu, and subsequently executed Chao to defuse the crisis. It

[55]*Shi ji*, 83.2993.

[56]*Shi ji*, 83.2993.

[57]*Shi ji*, 83.2993.

[58]For a detailed discussion of "baihong guanri," see Zhang Yue 張月, "Han Tang 'baihong guanri' jieshi fanshi zhi zhuanbian ji qi wenhua jiyi" 漢唐"白虹貫日"解釋範式之轉變及其文化記憶, *Wuhan daxue xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 76.5 (2023), 99–108.

[59]For the background of Liu Xiang's compilation of *Xinxu*, see Tang Chon Chit (Deng Junjie) 鄧駿捷, *Liu Xiang jiaoshu kaolun* 劉向校書考論 (Beijing: Renmin, 2012).

[60]There is some overlap between the *Xinyu* and *Shi ji*, but it is difficult to determine which copies which or if the two both copied an earlier source. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Chen Weisong 陳蔚松, "*Shi ji Xinxu* jiaokan ji" 《史記》《新序》校勘記, *Huazhong shiyuan xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 5 (1984), 69–76.

[61]Liu Yuejin 劉躍進, "Luelun Zou Yang Mei Sheng yu Xi Han qianqi liangda wenren jituan" 略論鄒陽、枚乘與西漢前期兩大文人集團, *Dong Wu xueshu* 2 (2020), 5–15.

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was at this juncture that Mei penned another letter, offering his advice to the king of Wu, using an allusion from the Warring States period: "Six states took advantage of Xinling's book, realized the pact proposed by Su Qin, encouraged Jing Ke's audacity, and united their efforts wholeheartedly to confront Qin. However, Qin eventually conquered and eliminated the six states, and brought the world under their control" (六國乘信陵之籍，明蘇秦之約，厲荆軻之威，并力一心以備秦。然秦卒禽六國，滅其社稷，而并天下).[62] Confronted with the power of Qin, each of the six states endeavored to find ways to resist Qin's dominance, but all efforts ultimately met with failure. Mei attributes this outcome to the disparity in resources and capabilities between the two sides. Mei believed that the King of Wu failed to grasp this point, a grave error especially when the Han Dynasty surpassed the Qin Dynasty in terms of territory and population. The inclusion of Jing Ke as a representative figure among the six kingdoms, alongside Lord Xinling 信陵君, Wei Wuji 魏無忌 (d. 243 BCE), and Su Qin 蘇秦 (d. 284 BCE) underscores the collective struggle of these states against the Qin. In contrast to Zou Yang's admonition, which draws a comparison between Qin and Han, as well as the six states and Wu, Mei concentrates on the downfall of the Qin Dynasty and extracts a lesson from it. Mei submitted two admonitions to the King of Wu: one before his rebellion, the other after his rebellion. When the King of Wu was still plotting against the central government, Mei's words were not as direct. However, on the second occasion, after the King of Wu had rebelled, Mei, who was already in another state at that time, wrote an admonition urging the King of Wu to comprehend the situation and refrain from heeding the words of lesser men, as doing so would result in disaster.

In the early Western Han, according to the "Yiwen zhi" 藝文志 (Bibliographical Treatise) of the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the [Western] Han Dynasty), Sima Xiangru and other scholars composed five "Jing Ke zan" 荆軻讚 (Eulogies on Jing Ke). The "Yiwen zhi" states, "Jing Ke attempted to assassinate the King of Qin on behalf of Yan but failed and died. Sima Xiangru and others commented on it" (軻爲燕刺秦王，不成而死，司馬相如等論之).[63] This fact was later confirmed by Liu Xie 劉勰 (fl. 500) in the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon), which states, "When Xiangru took up his pen, it started to praise Jing Ke" (至相如屬筆，始讚荆軻).[64] Unfortunately, these eulogies are no longer extant, so it is difficult to speculate as to their actual content. At this early stage of its development, this genre was often used to convey praise.[65] As the *Wenxin diaolong* records, "Based on its original meaning, the matter cultivates praise and admiration." (本其爲義，事生獎歎).[66] Although the "Jing Ke zan" was later lost, one cannot but imagine that it praises Jing Ke and recognizes the cultural significance of his act.

[62]Ban, *Han shu*, 51.2362.

[63]Ban, *Han shu*, 30. 1741.

[64]Fan Wenlan 范文瀾, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1958), 2.158.

[65]Regarding the stylistic theory of the *Wenxin diaolong*, see Zhang Jian 張健, "*Wenxin diaolong* de zuhe shi wenti lilun"《文心雕龍》的組合式文體理論, *Beijing daxue xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 54.3 (2017), 31–41.

[66]Fan, *Wenxin diaolong zhu*, 2.158.

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The other major positive interpretation of the Jing Ke lore in early China is Sima Qian's final comment on the biographies of the assassins: "These five men from Cao Mo to Jing Ke—some of their righteous deeds were successful, some were not, but they established their aims clearly, and none of them failed to live up to their ambitions. Their fame has been passed down to future generations. Were their acts in vain?" (自曹沫至荆軻五人，此其義或成或不成，然其立意較然，不欺其志，名垂後世，豈妄也哉).[67] Sima Qian argues that their place in historical memory and the nobility of their aims has to an extent justified their actions. Indeed, because of the *Shi ji*, the Jing Ke lore has been commemorated in various ways for more than two millennia. For example, the Western Jin poet Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 250–ca. 307) speaks highly of Jing Ke's character and spirit, "Though nobles thought highly of themselves, he saw them as dust and dirt. Though inferiors saw themselves as inferior, he prized them as the most weight" (貴者雖自貴，視之若埃塵。賤者雖自賤，重之若千鈞).[68]

Wang Chong follows in the footsteps of the *Shi ji* and uses the example of Jing Ke to articulate criteria for a worthy person in his *Lunheng* 論衡 (Discourses in the Balance).[69] Wang cites the examples of Jing Ke and Xia Wuju 夏無且 (fl. 227 BCE) to prove the point that "when people handle affairs, they accomplish some of their aims but fail to achieve their larger goals. Despite their failure, their momentum is great enough to shake the mountains" (人之舉事，或意至而功不成，事不立而勢貫山).[70] Wang further elucidates that "when intentions are good, it is not essential to achieve the goals. When righteousness is reached, it is not essential to complete the tasks" (志善不效成功，義至不謀就事).[71] Having the goodness and righteousness of the act as a standard rather than its success echoes the judgment of the *Shi ji* cited above. Wang bolsters his argument with the examples of Yurang, Wu Zixu, and Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 186 BCE) who plotted the assassination attempt on the First Emperor: "For all three men, the objective circumstances were disadvantageous, and their plans and plots did not come to fruition. They had momentum but did not achieve their goals. They had revenge plans but could not realize them" (三者道地不便，計畫不得，有其勢而無其功，懷其計而不得爲其事).[72] Although circumstances made it impossible to realize their plans, these people are still remembered by later generations because of their motivations. Wang therefore argues that worthy people should not be judged solely by their accomplishments, but also by their efforts and motivations.

Wang Chong's views probably influenced Wang Fu,[73] who lived through the dark period at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty. His *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 (Discourses of a

[67]*Shi ji*, 86.3079.

[68]Xiao Tong 蕭統, *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986), 21.990. English translation from Yue Zhang, *Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022), 40. For the full analysis of this poem, see Yue Zhang, "Self-Canonization in Zuo Si's 'Poems on History,'" *Journal of Chinese Humanities*, 5.2 (2020), 225–27.

[69]For an English translation of *Lunheng*, see Alfred Forke, *Lun-heng: Part I Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung, Part II Miscellaneous essays of Wang Ch'ung*, 2 vols. (New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962).

[70]Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 27.1108.

[71]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 27.1109.

[72]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 27.1109.

[73]David R. Knechtges, "Wang Fu 王符," in *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide*, Part Two, eds. David R. Knechtges and Chang Taiping (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1167.

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Recluse) discusses the social and economic problems of his era using historical examples.[74] Wang believes, "Once kindness brings people together, they will remain together until the very end. Hearts that sympathize with each other will only grow closer in hardship" (恩有所結，終身無解；心有所矜，賤而益篤).[75] Wang gives the examples of Zhuan Zhu 專諸 (fl. 515 BCE) and Jing Ke, who repaid kindness shown to them by dying for those who appreciated them. He criticizes "people who want to get to the top quickly; who scramble to revere their superiors but pay no attention to their subordinates; who compete with each other to rush forward without taking time to look back." (是以欲速之徒，競推上而不暇接下，爭逐前而不遑卹後).[76] Wang denounces the fickleness and ingratitude that he contrasts with Jing Ke's behavior.

Zou Yang's allusion highlighted Jing Ke's righteousness and loyalty, and Mei Sheng's allusion emphasizes Jing Ke's majesty and audacity. These views of Jing Ke are echoed by the comments at the end of "Cike liezhuan." The claim that Jing Ke's reputation will be transmitted to future generations in the *Shi ji* is validated by Wang Chong and Wang Fu's use of the Jing Ke lore. All these Han scholars valued Jing Ke's loyalty, righteousness, and good intentions. The positive and negative reception of the Jing Ke lore reflects the intellectual diversity of the Han. Even though Ru thought was established as orthodoxy by Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE), the era nevertheless could accommodate a wide range of viewpoints. Despite their different views, all the thinkers discussed above view the question of what constitutes ritual propriety and righteousness as key to their evaluation of Jing Ke. Jing Ke's personal righteousness was praised by Zou Yang, Mei Sheng, Sima Xiangru, Sima Qian, Wang Chong, and Wang Fu, but Jia Yi, Liu An, and Yang Xiong condemned what they saw as his lack of public virtue.

Mixed Reception of the Jing Ke Lore in the *Yantie lun*

The lively debates in the *Yantie lun* demonstrate the differences in interpretation of the Jing Ke lore in the early Han. In the sixth year of the Shiyuan reign (81 BCE), Huan Kuan 桓寬 (fl. 81 BCE) of the Western Han compiled *Discourses on Iron and Salt*.[77] The debate between the *dafu* 大夫 (reformists) and the *wenxue xianliang* 文學賢良 (modernists, abbreviated as *wenxue* hereafter), covered various economic, social, political, and diplomatic problems facing the Western Han dynasty. As Mark Csikszentmihalyi summarizes, "Problems with state revenues prompted discussion of the nationalization of important industries such as salt production and mining, which

[74]For influential studies of *Qianfu lun*, see Margaret J. Pearson, *Wang Fu and the Comments of a Recluse* (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1989); and Anne Behnke Kinney, *The Art of the Han Essay: Wang Fu's Ch'ien-fu lun* (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1990).

[75]Wang Fu 王符, *Qianfu lun jian jiaozheng* 潛夫論箋校正, ed. Wang Jipei 汪繼培 and Peng Duo 彭鐸 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 8.338.

[76]Wang, *Qianfu lun jian jiaozheng*, 8.339.

[77]For a good summary and analysis of the debates, see Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China, 104 BC to AD 9* (London: Routledge, 2019), 91–112. For the English translation of *Yantie lun*, see Esson M. Gale, trans., *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China* (Leiden: Brill, 1931). For research on *Yantie lun* from an economic perspective, see Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 124–26.

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was the occasion for the imperially sponsored debate preserved in the *Discourses on Salt and Iron*."[78]

One of the debates focuses on how to safeguard the security of the empire, maintain peace, and avoid border problems with the Xiongnu. The Han dynasty had dealt with threats to the northern frontier since its founding. Early on, the Han dynasty fostered a peaceful relationship with the Xiongnu through marriage alliances. As the economic and political power of the empire grew, Emperor Wu led military campaigns against the Xiongnu, which somewhat eased but did not eliminate the threats to the frontier, and incurred immense costs in terms of material resources and manpower that tested the imperial treasury and the overall economy of the empire. This ongoing problem was the context for this debate.

Jing Ke lore makes its appearance in the section discussing bravery. The *dafu* and *wenxue* scholars held different attitudes towards Jing Ke. The *dafu* proposed using an assassin to solve the problem of the Xiongnu threat. They emphasized the need for deterrence: "It is said that strong Chu and powerful Zheng had armor made of rhinoceros skin and the sharp swords of Tangxi. The two states had firm walls inside and relied on sharp weapons for battles outside, so they could deter the Central States and force their enemies to surrender" (世言强楚勁鄭，有犀兕之甲，棠谿之鋌也。內據金城，外任利兵，是以威行諸夏，强服敵國).[79] By way of contrast, the *wenxue* were idealistic and attempted to tame the Xiongnu via benevolent policy: "with morality as the city walls and benevolence and righteousness as the outer fortifications, no one dares to attack and no one dares to enter" (言以道德爲城，以仁義爲郭，莫之敢攻，莫之敢入).[80] They believed that the problem of the Xiongnu should be solved through moral probity and consolidation of power within the Han dynasty, rather than conspiring to use assassins: "Now instead of building an unbreakable city wall and an unstoppable army, there are those who rely on the bravery of an individual to exert the power of a three-*chi* blade. How small of them!" (今不建不可攻之城，不可當之兵，而欲任匹夫之役，而行三尺之刃，亦細矣！).[81] The *wenxue* found such a despicable act shameful.

In addition, they argued, "Jing Ke had been planning to assassinate the King of Qin for many years, but he was unsuccessful because he could not rely on a mere one-*chi* eight-*cun* dagger.[82] The King of Qin was initially surprised and afraid, but he killed Jing Ke, using his seven-*chi* sharp sword with the same courage he used to crack Meng Ben and Xia Yu" (荆軻懷數年之謀而事不就者，尺八匕首不足恃也。秦王憚於不意，列斷賁、育者，介七尺之利也).[83] The brave and positive image of the King of Qin established here is contrasted with the negative image presented in many of the texts discussed above. This depiction focuses on the quality of the king's long sword. A similar depiction of the king's majesty is documented in both the *Han shu* and the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature). The *Han shu* records "Qin Lingling

[78]Csikszentmihalyi, *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*, xxv.
[79]Wang Liqi 王利器, ed., *Yantie lun jiaozhu* 鹽鐵論校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 9.536.
[80]*Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 9.536–37.
[81]*Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 9.537.
[82]*Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 9.536. One *chi* and eight *cun* is about 36 centimeters.
[83]Seven *chi* is about 1.4 meters.

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ling shangshu" 秦零陵令信 (A Letter from the Lingling Magistrate of the Qin).[84] The *Wenxuan* records a slightly different title, "Qin Lingling ling shangshu" 秦零陵令上書 (The Lingling Magistrate of the Qin Presenting a Petition). This document describes the incident in a way that flatters the king: "Jing Ke held the dagger under his arm and suddenly assassinated Your Majesty. Your Majesty used your divine might to draw the long sword and save yourself." (荊軻挾匕首，卒刺陛下. 陛下以神武，扶揄長劍以自救).[85] This concise description of the assassination emphasizes the wisdom and bravery of the King of Qin as he defended himself with his own sword, resolving the crisis. In contrast to the "Cike liezhuan," this account does not mention the King of Qin's panic or that Xia Wuju had to prompt him to draw his sword. Instead, it serves as an illustration of the King of Qin's valor and martial prowess, showcasing his fearlessness in the face of danger and his ability to handle the crisis on his own. The composed and unhurried manner in which he drew his sword amidst difficulties underscores the king's strong mental fortitude. Conversely, the petition portrays Jing Ke's actions as underhanded, deceitful, and ignoble. Both the *Yantie lun* and "Qin Lingling ling shangshu" praise the King of Qin's composure and competence in handling the unexpected situation.

The *Yantie lun* contends that the reason for the failure of Jing Ke's assassination attempt was the poor quality of the weapon. This explanation contrasts with that of the *Shi ji*, which emphasizes Jing Ke's poor swordsmanship. As Michael Loewe emphasizes with respect to the *Yantie lun*, "This document is of almost unique value in so far as it sets out in the form of a dialogue and with remarkable clarity many of the controversial issues of the day."[86] The discussion of Jing Ke's failed assassination in the *Yantie lun* broadens the possible explanations for Jing Ke's failure. The *Shi ji* cites Lu Goujian to heavily imply that Jing Ke's poor swordsmanship was partially responsible for the failure of the plot. In the *Yantie lun*, the *wenxue* perspective emphasizes the insufficiency of the weapons Jing Ke uses.

Although the *Yantie lun* cites Jing Ke's failed assassination to demonstrate the importance of weapons, Huan Kuan records that the *dafu* countered the *wenxue*'s arguments: "If we have a brave man now, backed by the authority of the strong Han dynasty, we will defeat the unrighteous Xiongnu, put them to death, and punish them for their sins" (今誠得勇士，乘强漢之威，凌無義之匈奴，制其死命，責以其過).[87] The *dafu* believed that an assassination would cause internal chaos among the Xiongnu tribes, and the Han troops could then take advantage of the opportunity to pacify them, thus solving the border problem. It is notable that the *dafu* cited the exemplar of Jing Ke as they advocated for assassination as a viable strategy for containing the Xiongnu. Despite the failure of Jing Ke, later thinkers often referenced his attempt, reflecting and contributing to his profound influence. Although his assassination of Qin was not successful, the panic his attempt caused the King of Qin had some brief deterrent effect. But the faction opposing the *dafu* referred to values such as benevolence and virtue to dismiss Jing Ke and disapproved of such

[84]Ban, *Han shu*, 30.1739.
[85]Xiao, *Wenxuan*, 5.220.
[86]Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China, 104 BC to AD 9*, 91.
[87]*Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 9.537.

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underhanded tactics. The *wenxue* instead promoted better tools as the solution to the problem, again demonstrating their views using the story of Jing Ke. Although Emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) dismissed the hundred schools of thought and revered Ru thought, his reign in fact saw the further development of all kinds of different ideas, as reflected in the historiographic and philosophical discourses.

These different interpretations of Jing Ke's act were in part the result of differences in perspective. The debate between *dafu* and *wenxue* shows how "benevolence and righteousness" and *quanli* 權利 (potency and money) were conceptualized and understood.[88] Jing Ke's daring could easily encourage local people to defy the central government by force. This individual violence was incompatible with the way of benevolence and righteousness. The *wenxue* considered the act of assassination as an unacceptably destabilizing means of achieving an end. They emphasized benevolence and righteousness as values that would lead to long-term stability and unity.[89] With this logic, *wenxue* opposed the subjugation of the Xiongnu by overwhelming force, and preferred to instead use benevolence and righteousness to persuade them.

The *dafu*, represented by Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (ca. 155–80 BCE), on the other hand, supported the state monopolies on salt and iron production because he was concerned with accumulating the necessary human, material, and financial resources to prepare for the war against Xiongnu. He and his faction advanced the view that the state should make good use of individual interests, which provided the state with manpower and financial resources. In this situation, the *dafu* positively cited the brave warrior Jing Ke as a case that supports strengthening the central authority and highlights the importance of producing and using powerful weapons to accomplish tasks. A mid-Western Han renaissance greatly increased the state treasury and the power of the central government, allowing the state to orchestrate the assassination of the ruler of the Xiongnu and capitalize on the resulting chaos with a military campaign. As the lore evolved, not only did overall assessments of Jing Ke's acts change, but also there was greater consideration of the details of the plot.

Critically Discussing the Details in the Jing Ke Lore

In fact, some discussions of Jing Ke eschew assessment to instead focus on the details of the plot. From the very establishment of the lore, there has been heated debate over the details of the assassination. Scholars have had different views on various rumors surrounding Jing Ke, on whether the assassin managed to wound the king, and on whether the King of Qin wiped out Jing Ke's clan. The end of "Cike liezhuan" discusses the rumors around Jing Ke, commenting:

> 世言荆軻，其稱太子丹之命，"天雨粟，馬生角"也，太過。又言荆軻傷秦王，皆非也。始公孫季功、董生與夏無且游，具知其事，爲余道之如是。

[88] *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 10.613.

[89] According to Wang Liqi's explanation, *min* 民 here does not refer to the common people, but instead to powerful nobles and wealthy merchants. See *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 8.

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> When the world talked about Jing Ke, they said that he received the order from Prince Dan. It was an exaggeration to say, "Millet rained from the sky, and horses grew horns." It is also said that Jing Ke injured the King of Qin, which is not true either. When Gongsun Jigong and Master Dong [Zhongshu] were together with Xia Wuju, they all knew what had happened, and I have recorded the story just as it was told to me.[90]

The *Shi ji* directly criticizes what it claims are invented rumors, validating its own account by citing a direct witness, Xia Wuju, and associates of the witness, Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200–121 BCE) and Dong Zhongshu.[91] By making his sources clear in the "Cike lizhuan," Sima Qian powerfully refutes these rumors. By way of contrast, passages attributed to Zou Yang linked an unusual celestial phenomenon, the "white rainbow crossing the sun," with Jing Ke, and argued that Jing Ke's sincere behavior moved heaven to produce this baleful phenomenon.

Yan Danzi also records some strange phenomena associated with the Jing Ke lore,[92] but this time, the emphasis is placed on Prince Dan. Compared with the *Shi ji* and *Zhanguo ce*, the story of Jing Ke in *Yan Danzi* is more openly fictionalized, incorporating some absurd and fantastic details.[93] As a work of narrative literature, the

[90]*Shi ji*, 86.3078–79.

[91]Scholars have debated whether the "Cike liezhuan" was compiled by Sima Tan or Sima Qian. Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) states that Gongsun Hong and Dong Zhongshu learned the details of Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the King of Qin from Xia Wuju, and that they told the event to Sima Tan. Wang believes that both Gongsun and Dong lived in Sima Tan's time, but were not contemporaries with Sima Qian, and Sima Qian therefore possibly inherited this biography from his father, Sima Tan. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) concurs with Wang's assessment and confidently states that Sima Tan is the author of this biography. However, Yi Ning 易寧 and Yi Ping 易平 disagree, quoting Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54) and Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), who argue that Sima Qian copied and compiled the "Cike liezhuan" directly from the ancient *Zhanguo ce* text. To bolster this argument, Yi Ning and Yi Ping cite Sima Qian's self-introduction to the *Shi ji* and Yang Xiong's work, both of which state that the *Shi ji* was compiled and written by Sima Qian. They believe that Sima Qian only used Sima Tan's words in the final commentary passage of the "Cike liezhuan," and that Sima Qian largely compiled and wrote the *Shi ji* himself. For details regarding the scholarly debates on this topic, see Yi Ning 易寧 and Yi Ping 易平, "'Sima Tan zuo *Shi*' shuo zhiyi" "司馬談作史" 說質疑, *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* (Shehui kexue ban) 1 (2004), 67–75. It is notoriously difficult to determine who compiled the "Cike liezhuan" based on the extant evidence. Hypothetically speaking, Sima Qian also could have learned the details directly from Gongsun and Dong, who, while not quite contemporaries with Sima Qian, were alive when Sima Qian was young. Dong Zhongshu taught the young Sima Qian and may have informed him about the Jing Ke incident. It is plausible that either Sima Tan or Sima Qian compiled the "Cike liezhuan" based on this path of oral transmission and the examination of written documents. It is without dispute that Sima Tan began the *Shi ji* project and that Sima Qian completed it, but without new materials, it is difficult to determine the authorship of specific biographies.

[92]For the English translation of *Yan Danzi*, see Cheng Lin, *Prince Dan of Yann* (Shanghai: The World Book Company, 1946); Wolfgang Bauer and Herbert Franke, eds., *The Golden Casket: Chinese Novellas of Two Millennia*, trans. Christopher Levenson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 30–41; and Peter Rushton, "Prince Tan of Yen," in *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations*, ed. Y. M. Ma and Joseph S.M. Lau (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 43–49.

[93]Scholars have various opinions on the textual history of the *Yan Danzi* and have proposed dates of composition as early as the Warring States and as late as the Tang. It is notoriously difficult to pinpoint an individual author for this text, though some scholars have attempted to address this issue. For example, Zhang Haiming argues that Jiang Yan is the author, while Ye Gang 葉崗 argues for Zou Yang. For a recent detailed summary and critical discussion about the dating and authorship of the *Yan Danzi*, see Ye Gang,

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Yan Danzi possesses a distinct novelistic style that sets it apart from historical biographies. The opening of the *Yan Danzi*, for example, is bizarre. Crown Prince Dan is taken as a hostage by Qin, but the King of Qin treats him unpleasantly and disrespectfully. Dan therefore asks to return home. The King of Qin gives him permission to return home only when "crows heads turn white and horses grow horns" (令烏白頭、馬生角).[94] Crown Prince Dan looks up to the sky and sighs deeply, which makes those white crows and horned horses appear. These improbable omens are only the first of several extraordinary events the *Yan Danzi* records as Crown Prince Dan makes his way back to Yan. While James Liu compares and comments on the differences between the *Yan Danzi* and the *Shi ji*, he does not hold a high opinion of the *Yan Danzi* as a whole, considering the added details to be both implausible and trivial.[95]

The comments at the end of "Cike liezhuan" are openly skeptical of such surreal phenomena, which indicates that such stories were in circulation at the time the "Cike" was compiled. Based on how the *Shi ji* responds to these stories, Barbieri-Low reasonably assumes that the biography of Jing Ke may draw selectively from the *Yan Danzi* or similar oral lore, rejecting aspects of those stories that are overly romantic and dramatic.[96] For example, *Yan Danzi* states that during the final assassination attempt on the King of Qin, the zither music conveyed a secret message to the King of Qin which helped him escape the assassination. By way of contrast, the *Shi ji* omits this detail. The *Shi ji* account cites its sources as Xia Wuju, who personally witnessed the assassination attempt in the Qin court, and the Western Han scholars Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong, who learned the details of the event from Xia.[97] The similarity in content between the *Shi ji* and *Yan Danzi* accounts is intriguing. It indicates that the Jing Ke lore entered the collective memory of later generations. Similar plots appear in many different documents. The circulation of Jing Ke lore has flourished since its inception. Its many versions circulated in different regions, which in turn contributed to an even more complex and divergent Jing Ke lore.

Later Han scholars would also question the authenticity of the cosmic phenomena associated with Jing Ke. Ying Shao's 應劭 (153–196 CE) *Fengsu tongyi* paraphrases and summarizes the account of Jing Ke in the *Shi ji*, and then refutes the circulated rumor that the "millet rained from sky" because of Jing Ke. Ying argues, "Dan indeed liked to retain scholars and guests, and he was not stingy. This story was therefore refined and developed out of the small sayings then circulating among the common people." (丹實好士，無所愛悋也，故閭閻小論飾成之耳).[98] According to this argument, the rumor was made up or exaggerated by the followers of Crown Prince Dan of Yan in order to glorify his image. In this light, it is noticeable that the saying was apparently still so prevalent in the Eastern Han that Ying Shao felt the need to refute it.

Yan Danzi yanjiu 《燕丹子》研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 250–347. For a list of important scholarship on the *Yan Danzi*, see David R. Knechtges, "Yan Danzi 燕丹子," in *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide*, Part Three, ed. David R. Knechtges, and Chang Taiping (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1767–69.

[94]Cheng Yizhong 程毅中, ed., *Yan Danzi* 燕丹子 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 3.

[95]James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 85.

[96]Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China*, 23, 134.

[97]Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China*, 134.

[98]Ying Shao 應劭, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注, ed. Wang Liqi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 2.92.

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Ying Shao offered a reasonable explanation for these strange reported phenomena, but some Han scholars, most notably Wang Chong, were even more strongly critical of these legends. Although, as discussed above, Wang praised Jing Ke's good intentions and righteousness in assassinating the King of Qin, he believed that a man's sincerity could not move heaven and earth. Wang was skeptical of the belief that nature and humans could interact with each other, and that natural phenomena served as omens for the world of men. Wang instead believed that the relationship between natural phenomena and historical developments was merely coincidental. Wang acknowledged that it was possible for such strange phenomena as "a white rainbow crossing the sun and Venus swallowing the lunar lodge Mao" (白虹貫日、太白蝕昴) to appear, but he did not think such scenes related to "Jing Ke's plan and Mr. Wei's plot." (荆軻之謀，衛先生之畫).[99] Wang's conclusions strongly contrasted with those of scholars who believed in *tianren ganying* 天人感應 (the resonance between nature and humans).

In *juan* 15 of the *Lunheng*, Wang again questions the relationship between Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the King of Qin and the "white rainbow crossing the sun":

> 荆軻欲刺秦王，秦王之心不動，而白虹貫日乎？　然則白虹貫日，天變自成，非軻之精爲虹而貫日也.
>
> Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate the King of Qin did not even touch the latter's heart, so how could he make a white rainbow cross the sun? In that case, the white rainbow crossed the sun naturally due to a change in the sky, not because Jing Ke's essence and energy turned into a white rainbow and passed through the sun.[100]

Wang also raises the problem of causality: "How do we know that a white rainbow crossing the sun did not cause Jing Ke's assassination of the Qin king?" (何知白虹貫日，不致刺秦王).[101] Furthermore, if this omen was supposed to indicate the success of Jing Ke's assassination attempt, how can his failure be understood? Through the case of Jing Ke, Wang questions the validity of *tianren ganying*.

The context of Wang's argument was the integration of Ru thought with the doctrine of the five phases (*wuxing*) and *yinyang*. Employing both *wuxing* and *yinyang*, the theory of omens was introduced into the political sphere. According to this theory, interactions between heaven and humans go both ways. On one hand, human actions influence celestial phenomenon. As Zou Yang argued, Jing Ke's sincere belief moved heaven, thus creating the "white rainbow crossing the sun" phenomenon. On the other hand, celestial phenomena also influence human actions. For instance, Liu Xiang's *Lieshi zhuan* 列士傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Officials) record of the same event notes that the white rainbow did not completely cross the sun, predicting the failure of Jing Ke's assassination attempt. *Tianren ganying* and the

[99]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 5.233.
[100]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 15.661.
[101]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 15.662.

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calamities theory of *yin* and *yang* gradually developed into the belief in prophecy in the Han, which became so powerful that it seriously threatened the power of the monarch. Out of the need to bolster imperial power, scholars in the Eastern Han criticized the concept of prophecy. In addition to the political motivations for arguing against prophecy, scholars were critical of a doctrine that could not reasonably explain the frequent destructive natural disasters of the Eastern Han.[102]

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, scholars such as Wang Chong were dissatisfied with the fusion of Ru thought with *yinyang* theory. They wanted to return to the original Ru thought focused on objective reality and wary of subjective speculation, superstition, and *fengshui*. Therefore, when they discussed the Jing Ke incident, they also criticized the celestial phenomena associated with it. Wang took several minor official positions, but he often came into conflict with superiors and noble family members due to his personal beliefs. As a result, he had to leave government service and return home to become a private teacher to earn a living. The bitterness of a largely unsuccessful political career may have contributed to his opposition to contemporary thought. Wang used the Jing Ke case several times to make his points, and each time, his arguments were mostly directed against the use of celestial phenomena as omens.

Along with the problem of celestial phenomena, another much discussed aspect of the Jing Ke lore during the Han was Gao Jianli's attempted assassination of the First Emperor of Qin, which took place after Jing Ke's failed attempt and the Qin unification. Gao Jianli attempted to avenge him and assassinate the First Emperor by throwing a *zhu* (a stringed musical instrument) at him.[103] This detail is also recorded in *Shi ji* but the material Wang cites adds new and bizarre details: "Gao Jianli used the *zhu* to hit the forehead of the King of Qin. The king was wounded and died in three months."[104] (漸麗以筑擊秦王額。秦王病傷，三月而死). This unbelievable detail, Wang argues, makes the whole account dubious. Because of the exaggerated and propagandistic *fenshu kengru* 焚書坑儒 (burning books and burying of Confucian scholars) policy of the First Emperor of Qin and the need for the Han to establish their legitimacy, anti-Qin sentiment was strong among Han scholars. It is therefore possible that some fabricated plots may have been added to the story to further denigrate the First Emperor. The *Shi ji* documents Gao Jianli's assassination without mentioning the First Emperor's wound by the *zhu*, and Wang agrees that Gao's attempt was unsuccessful and he was executed: "Later in an unknown year, Gao Jianli attacked the First Emperor with a *zhu*; however, he failed and was executed." (後不審何年，高漸麗以筑擊始皇，不中，誅漸麗).[105] Wang instead presents two popular claims about the death of the First Emperor of Qin: "As for the First Emperor, some said that he died in the sand dunes and some stated that he died in Qin. The cause of his death was said to be the consequence of long-term illness." (一始皇之身，世或言死於沙丘，或言死於秦，其死，言恒病瘡).[106] Wang viewed the second claim as dubious

[102]Zhang Yuechun 章曰春 and Han Xiaojuan 韓曉娟, "Ziran zaihai yu Donghan shenxue de shanbian" 自然災害與東漢神學的嬗變, *Kexue yu wushen lun* 6 (2006), 38–39.

[103]By the time Gao Jianli attempted to assassinate the King of Qin, the Qin had already unified the country and the King of Qin had become the First Emperor.

[104]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 4.200.

[105]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 4.200.

[106]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 4.201.

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because it lacked support from historical records: "Most of the *zhuanshu* sayings are often not true,[107] but the general public is unable to determine their authenticity." (傳書之言，多失其實，世俗之人，不能定也).[108] The rumor that Gao mortally wounded the First Emperor may be related to the general anti-Qin atmosphere of the Han.[109]

The account of Gao Jianli's assassination attempt against the First Emperor in the *Fengsu tongyi* is like that of the *Shi ji* and *Lunheng*.[110] It discusses the Gao Jianli story in the passage on the musical instrument *zhu*: "With the opportunity to get close to the King of Qin approaching, Jianli filled his *zhu* with lead. As he came near the king, he raised the instrument to strike the king, but did not hit him. As a result, Gao Jianli was put to death" (稍益近之。漸離乃以鉛置筑木中，後進得近，舉筑撲始皇，不中，於是遂誅).[111] Gao Jianli strummed the *zhu* to bid Jing Ke farewell at Yishui. He also struck it and attempted to avenge Jing Ke's death. The Gao Jianli story was circulated together with the Jing Ke lore, and the image of Gao Jianli was used to express anti-Qin sentiments. However, scholars in the Eastern Han disputed these rumors, especially the idea that Gao Jianli injured the king. Wang Chong felt that the story was in fact exaggerated throughout to highlight Jing Ke's fierceness. Wang quotes an account that is similar to that of the *Shi ji*, except for the final dramatic detail: "Jing Ke attacked the King of Qin for Crown Prince Dan of Yan with a dagger, but the assassination was unsuccessful. The King of Qin drew his sword and stabbed him. Jing Ke threw his dagger at the king and missed the target, but the dagger hit a bronze pillar and penetrated one *chi* deep" (荆軻爲燕太子刺秦王，操匕首之劍，刺之不得。秦王拔劍擊之。軻以匕首擿秦王，不中，中銅柱，入尺).[112] Wang asserts that the last part of that account is implausible: "Even though he had been injured by the [king's] Longyuan sword, Jing Ke had enough arm strength to throw a light and small dagger into a hard bronze pillar" (以荆軻之手力，投輕小之匕首，身被龍淵之劍刃，入堅剛之銅柱).[113] Given Jing Ke's condition, Wang felt this superhuman dagger throw was inconceivable.

The third point of controversy with respect to Jing Ke among Han scholars was whether the First Emperor also wiped out Jing Ke's clan. The "Lu Zhonglian and Zou Yang *liezhuan*" states, "As for the destruction of Jing Ke's clan to the seventh degree and Yao Li's burning of his wife and son, how could this be worthy of praise?" (然則荆軻之湛七族，要離之燒妻子，豈足道哉!).[114] Jing Ke is alluded to in this case as an example of draconian punishment. Zou Yang used the Jing Ke example to persuade

[107]*Zhuanshu* 傳書 in the Han is a genre with legendary and fictional elements that aims both to entertain the reader and to illuminate the classics through historical and legendary materials. See Zhao Hui 趙輝, "Cong Handai 'zhuanshu' kan zhengshi xiang lishi yanyi de yanhua" 從漢代"傳書"看正史向歷史演義的衍化, *Wenxue yichan* 5 (2016), 112.

[108]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 4.201.

[109]For research on anti-Qin sentiment in the Han, see Wang Gaoxin 汪高鑫, "Handai shehui yu shixue sixiang" 漢代社會與史學思想, *Shixue shi yanjiu* 1 (2013), 14–23; and Jiang Sheng 姜生, "'Qinren bude zhendao' kao" "秦人不得真道" 考, *Wen shi zhe* 1 (2021), 125–42.

[110]A seminal study of *Fengsu tongyi* is Michael Nylan, "Ying Shao's *Feng su t'ung yi*: An Exploration of Problems in Han Dynasty Political, Philosophical and Social Unity," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1982.

[111]Ying, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu*, 6.300–01.

[112]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 8.372.

[113]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 8.373.

[114]*Shi ji*, 83.2999.

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the king not to be influenced by villains. Zou's broader point is that a superior need not know a subordinate for a long time to trust them. For instance, Fan Wuqi believed in Jing Ke and was willing to sacrifice his life for him, even though they only knew each other for a short time. Zou Yang commented: "Their conduct was in accordance with their intentions, and [they] had a boundless admiration for righteousness" (行合於志，而慕義無窮也).[115] Zou felt that this kind of trust was unshakable and persuaded King Xiao of Liang to invest such trust in him: "Now, a ruler should put aside his pride, hold a sincerity that makes people want to serve him, reveal his heart, show his authenticity, be faithful and loyal, carry out his profound virtue, share hardships and glories together with people, and be unchanged in how he treats scholars" (今世主誠能去驕傲之心，懷可報之意，披心腹，見情素，隳肝膽，施德厚，終與之窮通，無變於士).[116] Zou Yang hoped King Xiao of Liang would use benevolence to influence people. Such an environment of governance would be one in which events like "Jing Ke's clan being exterminated to the seventh degree and Yao Li 要離 (d. 513 BCE) burning his wife and children to death"[117] (荆軻之沉七族，要離之燔妻子) would not happen again. The *Shi ji* does not document the extermination of Jing Ke's clan, which places Qin in an extremely negative light. This event may have circulated in folklore to highlight the unrestrained violence of the King of Qin. Sima Qian must have been aware of this rumor about the execution of Jing Ke's clan, but as with other dubious rumors such as the "sky raining millet," he chose not to record it in his biography.

Yang Xiong affirmed an even more extreme version of this story:

> 荆軻爲燕太子丹刺秦王，後誅軻九族，其後恚恨不已，復夷軻之一里
>
> Jing Ke attempted to assassinate the King of Qin for Crown Prince Dan of Yan, and then the king had all of Jing Ke's relatives to the ninth degree executed. After that, he was still angry, so he had all of Jing Ke's fellow villagers within one *li* executed.[118]

Yang's account changes the seventh degree in the previous texts to the ninth degree and adds that even villagers not related to Jing Ke were slaughtered. This intensification reflects Yang's strongly anti-Qin attitudes. Even as Yang criticized Jing Ke for his lack of righteousness, he condemned the First Emperor for his cultural policies, such as the alleged burning of books and burying of scholars.

As with the previous cases, Wang Chong often disputes popular opinions and expounds what he feels is an objective and impartial evaluation of historical figures. Wang strongly objected to false additions to historical records. Wang felt that the execution of Jing Ke's fellow villagers was such an addition: "Even though the King of Qin was tyrannical, he would not have killed all the people in Jing Ke's village" (夫秦雖無道，無爲盡誅荆軻之里).[119] Furthermore, Wang points out that there is no documentation of such an event in the records: "In the twentieth year of the First

[115]Ma Shinian 馬世年, trans. and annot., *Xinxu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 3.134.
[116]Ma, *Xinxu*, 3.141.
[117]Ma, *Xinxu*, 3.141.
[118]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 7.356–57.
[119]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 7.357.

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Emperor's reign, the state of Yan sent Jing Ke to assassinate him. The First Emperor became aware of it and had Jing Ke dismembered in the market. The records do not say that all the people in his community were killed" (始皇二十年，燕使荆軻刺秦王，秦王覺之，體解軻以徇，不言盡誅其閭).[120] Indeed, the *Shi ji* and other early accounts do not document the incident.

The exaggeration of the consequences of Jing Ke's assassination attempt is likely related to the anti-Qin ideology of the time. Han scholars often found faults with the Qin dynasty and its ruler and exaggerated his paranoia and cruelty. The Jing Ke lore became almost immediately widespread in early China and consequently became a topic of debate and a useful reference point. As the lore was disseminated in different regions and strata of society, it was adapted to the demands of the local environment. Even scholars adopted, adapted, and changed the Jing Ke lore to serve their own purposes.

The Jing Ke Lore in Shrines and Tombs

The Jing Ke lore has not only appeared in transmitted texts, but also in excavated materials, such as *huaxiang shi* 畫像石 (pictorial stones) in shrines and tombs. *Huaxiang shi* were prevalent from the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty to the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, and they depict a wide array of subjects, from historical stories to families socializing and court scenes to cosmic phenomena.[121] Scholars attribute the prevalence of *huaxiang shi* to three phenomena: land consolidation, the rise of *houzang* 厚葬 (elaborate burial practices), and new attitudes toward death. The consolidation of land in the mid and late Eastern Han dynasty provided an economic basis for the production and purchase of *huaxiang shi*.[122] The Han court officially endorsed Ru thought and used a system in which honest and filial people were recommended for office, incentivizing elaborate burial practices, which were a way to demonstrate filial piety.[123] Finally, during the Han, beliefs about the interaction between nature and human beings and the possibility of an afterlife were further developed. Many images in the *huaxiang shi* represent scenes from real life, but they are often more luxurious than the life of the deceased, reflecting the aspiration for a better life in the hereafter.

The *huaxiang shi* also includes historical stories. Jing Ke's assassination attempt was often represented, especially in the Eastern Han. The Eastern Han was a time of private feuds and loyalties, and of vengeance on behalf of both family and friends;[124]

[120]Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 7.357.

[121]For the comprehensive study of *huaxiang shi* in the Han, see Xin Lixiang 信立祥, *Handai huaxiang shi zonghe yanjiu* 漢代畫像石綜合研究 (Beijing: Wenwu, 2000); and Xing Yitian 邢義田, *Hua wei xinsheng: Huaxiang shi, huaxiang zhuan yu bihua* 畫為心聲: 畫像石、畫像磚與壁畫 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011); and Poon Ming Kay (Pan Mingji) 潘銘基, "Lun Han huaxiang shi yu chuanshi wenxian suo zai gushi zhi yitong" 論漢畫像石與傳世文獻所載故事之異同, in *Chutu wenxian yu chuanshi dianji de quanshi* 出土文獻與傳世典籍的詮釋, ed. Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu gu wenzi yanjiu zhongxin 復旦大學出土文獻與古文字研究中心 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2019), 262–95.

[122]Shiho Yamashita 山下志保, "Huaxiang shi mu yu Donghan shidai de shehui" 畫像石墓與東漢時代的社會, trans. Xia Mailing 夏麥陵, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 4 (1993), 85.

[123]Jiang Yingju 蔣英炬, "Guanyu Han huaxiang shi chansheng beijing yu yishu gongneng de sikao" 關於漢畫像石產生背景與藝術功能的思考, *Kaogu* 1998.11, 90–96.

[124]Zhou Tianyou 周天遊, "Liang Han Fuchou shengxing de yuanyin" 兩漢復仇盛行的原因, *Lishi yanjiu* 1 (1991), 121–35.

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and many respected Jing Ke's bravery. Like the Qin, the Han Dynasty prohibited private vengeance until the outbreak of the Lulin Red Eyebrows (綠林赤眉) uprising. Afterward, Emperor Zhang 章帝 (r. 75–88) made it legal to seek revenge for the humiliation of one's parents. Such vengeance could be justified as evidence of filiality, loyalty, and righteousness from the perspective of private morality which existed in tension with official legal prohibitions. During the Eastern Han, many men fulfilled their obligations to their rulers and family members through revenge and their actions were often pardoned.[125] Most of the extant *huaxiang shi* were carved during this period. The story of Jing Ke is one of righteous bravery on the part of an individual and was naturally popular during a time of private feuds.

Moreover, since the target of Jing Ke's assassination attempt was the King of Qin, the Jing Ke lore was used in *huaxiang shi* to express the anti-Qin sentiments that were popular during the Han. In all *huaxiang shi* of the Jing Ke lore, the King of Qin is depicted as a diminutive villain. This demeaning depiction also occurs in *huaxiang shi* of other Qin-related events such as "Wanbi gui Zhao" 完璧歸趙 (Returning the Complete Jade to Zhao) and "Sishui lao ding" 泗水撈鼎 (Retrieving the Tripod from the Si River). In the first story, the Zhao official Lin Xiangru 藺相如 (ca. 329–ca. 259 BCE) uses deft diplomacy to protect the precious jade from the Qin king. In the second story, the First Emperor attempts and fails to retrieve a tripod that represents power and legitimacy from the Si River. These stories might reflect Han contemplations of the lessons of the Qin.

Jing Ke's assassination attempt is depicted in twenty-one extant *huaxiang shi*, distributed widely throughout China.[126] There are six in Shandong province, including three in the *Wu Liang ci* 武梁祠 (Wu Liang Shrine Ancestral Hall),[127] one in Nanyang 南陽 in Weishan 微山 prefecture,[128] one in the Han tomb of Beizhai

[125]For a detailed discussion of the reasons for the flourishing of private vengeance in the Han dynasty, see Zhou Tianyou 周天遊, "Liang Han Fuchou shengxing de yuanyin" 兩漢復仇盛行的原因, *Lishi yanjiu* 1 (1991), 121–35; Zhang Tao 張濤, "Jingxue yu Handai de sangzang, jisi huodong ji Fuchou zhi feng" 經學與漢代的喪葬、祭祀活動及復仇之風, *Shandong daxue xuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 4 (2001), 60–67; and Liu Houqin 劉厚琴, "Lun ruxue yu liang Han fuchou zhi feng" 論儒學與兩漢復仇之風, *Qi Lu xuekan* 2 (1994), 62–66.

[126]Although recent scholarship lists only fifteen *huaxiang shi* on the subject from the Han, an examination of the *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji* alongside other archaeological reports and summaries suggests that there are in fact twenty-one Jing Ke *huaxiang shi* in total. See Zheng Hongli 鄭紅莉, "Handai huaxiang shi 'Jing Ke ci Qin' tuxiang tantao" 漢代畫像石"荆軻刺秦"圖像探討, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 2016.3, 75–81; Tang Changshou 唐長壽, "Hanhua 'Jing Ke ci Qinwang' tu de chongxin jiedu: Donghan shizi jituan de 'bu hezuo' sichao" 漢畫"荆軻刺秦王"圖的重新解讀：東漢士子集團的"不合作"思潮, in *Da Han xiongfeng—Zhongguo Hanhua xuehui dishiyijie nianhui lunwen ji* 大漢雄風——中國漢畫學會第十一屆年會論文集, ed. Gu Sen 顧森 and Shao Zeshui 邵澤水 (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu, 2008), 115–22; Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui 中國畫像石全集編輯委員會, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji* 中國畫像石全集 (Jinan: Shandong meishu and Zhengzhou: Henan meishu, 2000); Tsuruma Kazuyuki 鶴間和幸, *Shin teikoku no keisei to chiiki* 秦帝國の形成と地域 (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2013), 266–84; and Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu yuan 四川省文物考古研究院, Sichuan shiku si baohu yanjiu yuan 四川石窟寺保護研究院, and Leshan dafo shiku yanjiu yuan 樂山大佛石窟研究院, eds. *Leshan yamu: Leshan dafo yichan fanwei nei yamu diaocha baogao* 樂山崖墓：樂山大佛遺產範圍內崖墓調查報告 (Beijing: Wenwu, 2022).

[127]Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 1·Shandong Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集1·山東漢畫像石, 29, 40, and 56. These Wu Liang Shrine paintings are probably the best-known pictorial representations of the Jing Ke lore. See Figures 1–3 in the Appendix.

[128]This *huaxiang shi* was discovered in 2002 after the *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji* was published. For its image and brief depiction, see Weishan xian wenwu guanli suo 微山縣文物管理所, "Shandong Weishan

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village 北寨村 in Yi'nan 沂南 prefecture,[129] and one in tomb No. 1 of Balimiao 八里廟 in Yanggu 陽谷 prefecture.[130] In Sichuan and Chongqing, there are nine:[131] one each in tombs AM1, No. 40, BM19, and BM101 of Mahao 麻浩 in Leshan 樂山,[132] one each in Tombs BM1 and No. 22 of Shiziwan 柿子灣 in Leshan,[133] one in the Han tomb of Hechuan 合川 village in Chongqing,[134] one in Sarcophagus No. 2 of the Wei-Jin tomb in Jiang'an 江安 prefecture,[135] and one in Qu

xian jinnian chutu de Han huaxiang shi" 山東微山縣近年出土的漢畫像石, *Kaogu* 2006.2, 35–47. See Figure 4 in the Appendix.

[129]*Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 1, Shandong Han huaxiang shi*, 167. For a detailed discussion of the Yinan tomb and its paintings, see Lydia Thompson, "The Yi'nan Tomb: Narrative and Ritual in Pictorial Art of the Eastern Han (25–220 C.E.)," Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 1998). See Figure 5 in the Appendix.

[130]This *huaxiang shi* is briefly mentioned in Liu Shanyi 劉善沂and Sun Huaisheng 孫淮聲, "Shandong Yanggu xian Bali miao Han huaxiang shi mu" 山東陽谷縣八里廟漢畫像石墓, *Wenwu* 1989.8, 48–56. See Figure 6 in the Appendix.

[131]Tang Changshou mentions that there are five cliff tomb paintings related to Jing Ke lore in Maohao and Shiziwan. See Tang Changshou 唐長壽, *Leshan yamu he Pengshan yamu* 樂山崖墓和彭山崖墓 (Chengdu: Dianzi keji daxue, 1994), 67, 135–36. In another article, Tang is more specific about the location of these paintings. See Tang, "Hanhua 'Jing Ke ci Qinwang' tu de chongxin jiedu," 116. However, he only displays the first of the five images. As a matter of fact, according to the Research Institute of Leshan Giant Buddha Grottoes Stone Caves (樂山大佛石窟研究院), there are six pictorial stones of the Jing Ke lore in Maohao and Shiziwan. See Figures 7–12.

[132]The Jing Ke related painting in tomb AM1 (Appendix, Figure 7) is maintained well and has become the representative image of the Mahao tomb. Other Jing Ke images of Mahao are similar in terms of their content and design. However, the remaining three are blurry due to physical weathering. Of those four *huaxiang shi*, only the first one is well documented. See Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 7·Sichuan Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集7·四川漢畫像石, 1. For a detailed report of the Mahao cave paintings, see Richard Edwards, "The Cave Reliefs at Ma Hao I," *Artibus Asiae* 17.1 (1954), 4–28, and Richard Edwards, "The Cave Reliefs at Ma Hao II," *Artibus Asiae* 17.2 (1954), 103–29. For a survey of the cliff tombs in Leshan, see Tang, *Leshan yamu he Pengshan yamu*. Appendix Figure 8 is a photograph by Hu Xueyuan 胡學元 and provided courtesy of the Research Institute of Leshan Giant Buddha Grottoes. For Appendix Figure 9, see Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu yuan, Sichuan shiku si baohu yanjiu yuan, and Leshan dafo shiku yanjiu yuan, *Leshan yamu: Leshan dafo yichan fanwei nei yamu diaocha baogao*, 85 and plate 38. The image is also available at https://sckg.com/qinhan/1784.html, accessed March 11, 2024. For Appendix Figure 10, see Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu yuan, Sichuan shiku si baohu yanjiu yuan, and Leshan dafo shiku yanjiu yuan, *Leshan yamu: Leshan dafo yichan fanwei nei yamu diaocha baogao*, plate 91. For the four Jing Ke images of Mahao, see Figures 7–10 in the Appendix.

[133]These two cliff tomb paintings are briefly mentioned in Yang Tao 楊韜, "Leshan Shiziwan yamu qun jiazhi chutan" 樂山柿子灣崖墓群價值初探, *Leshan shifan xueyuan xuebao* 37.7 (2022), 68–75. Appendix Figure 11 is provided courtesy of the Research Institute of Leshan Giant Buddha Grottoes. The line drawing of Figure 11 is from Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu yuan, Sichuan shiku si baohu yanjiu yuan, and Leshan dafo shiku yanjiu yuan, *Leshan yamu: Leshan dafo yichan fanwei nei yamu diaocha baogao*, 191. Appendix Figure 12 is photographed by Hu Xueyuan and provided by the Research Institute of Leshan Giant Buddha Grottoes.

[134]*Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 7·Sichuan Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集7·四川漢畫像石, 50–51. Zhu Hu 朱滸 and Shi Xing 侍行, "Hanhua shanxing guan laiyuan yu hanyi xintan" 漢畫山形冠來源與含義新探, *Yishu tansuo* 36.3 (2022), 44. See Figure 13 in the Appendix.

[135]Gao Wen 高文, ed., *Sichuan Handai shiguan huaxiang ji* 四川漢代石棺畫像集 (Beijing: Renming meishu, copyright 1997, printing 1998), 125. Zhang Zijiang 張孜江, "Wei Jin zhi Sui Tang shiqi de shiguan huaxiang yishu" 魏晉至隋唐時期的石棺畫像藝術, *Wenwu jianding yu jianshang* no. 12 (2011), 77. See Figure 14 in the Appendix.

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prefecture 渠縣.[136] There are two in Jiangsu: one at Siyang Dagudun 泗陽打鼓墩[137] and one at Gaochun Gucheng 高淳固城.[138] In the Shanbei region, there are two: one in Suide 綏德 village[139] and the other at Dabaodang 大保當 in Shenmu 神木.[140] There is one in Zhejiang in the east wall of the front room of the Han tomb in Haining 海寧[141] and one in Tanghe 唐河 of Nanyang in Henan.[142]

Richard Edwards has commented on the Sichuan *Mahao yamu* 麻浩崖墓 (Mahao cliff tombs, Appendix Figure 7).[143] He primarily compared these reliefs with the Jing Ke *huaxiang shi* in the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall in Shandong, emphasizing their differences. For instance, the image of Qin Wuyang in the former shows him curled up and kneeling, while in the latter, Qin Wuyang is depicted lying on the ground in an awkward manner. Thinking about the iconography more broadly, Edwards argues that the King of Qin in the *huaxiang shi* of Mahao is generally portrayed as more agitated, similar to the depiction of the king in other *huaxiang shi*, all of which highlight and expose his weaknesses and flaws, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Han dynasty that overthrew Qin rule and claimed the Mandate of Heaven. In the scholarship on the Jing Ke iconography, the exquisite engravings of the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall, constructed by the Wu family in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, has fortunately been preserved and restored, allowing for the most fruitful studies so far of the Jing Ke *huaxiang shi*,[144] which will be discussed substantially later.

[136]*Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 7·Sichuan Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集7·四川漢畫像石, 63. Zheng, "Handai huaxiangshi 'Jing Ke ci Qin' tuxiang tantao," 77. See Figure 15 in the Appendix.

[137]This *huaxiang shi* is not recorded in *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji*. For an archeological report on this site and two rubbings and a brief description of this image, see Huaiyin shi bowuguan 淮陰市博物館 and Siyang xian tushuguan 泗陽縣圖書館, "Jiangsu Siyang dagudun Fanshi huaxiang shi mu" 江蘇泗陽打鼓墩樊氏畫像石墓, *Kaogu* 1992.9, 811–30. See Figure 16 in the Appendix.

[138]This pictorial brick was difficult to identify. Scholars have different views about what it in fact depicts. For the archeological report, see Nanjing shi bowuguan 南京市博物館, "Jiangsu Gaochun Gucheng Dong Han huaxiang zhuanmu" 江蘇高淳固城東漢畫像磚墓, *Kaogu* 1989.5, 427–28. See Figure 17 in the Appendix. You Zhenyao 尤振堯 disputes this archeological report, which identifies this painting as portraying the Hongmen banquet (*Hongmen Yan* 鴻門宴). For details, see You Zhenyao, "Sunan diqu Donghan huaxiang zhuanmu ji qi xiangguan wenti de tanxi" 蘇南地區東漢畫像磚墓及其相關問題的探析, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 3 (1991), 53.

[139]This *huaxiang shi* is not included in *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji*. For its rubbing and brief description, see Ji Yulian 紀玉蓮, *Suide Dong Han huaxiang shi gaishu* 綏德東漢畫像石概述, *Wenwu shijie* 4 (2011), 21. See Figure 18 in the Appendix.

[140]Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 5, Shaanxi, Shanxi Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集5·陝西、山西漢畫像石, 168–69. See Figure 19 in the Appendix.

[141]Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 4, Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集4·江蘇、安徽、浙江漢畫像石, 175. See Figure 20 in the Appendix.

[142]Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, ed., *Zhongguo huaxiang shi quanji 6, Henan Han huaxiang shi* 中國畫像石全集6·河南漢畫像石, 13. See Figure 21 in the Appendix.

[143]Richard Edwards, "The Cave Reliefs at Ma Hao I," 103–29. The literature review of scholarly books and articles of "Jing Ke ci Qiwang" written in English is adopted from my article, "Fanyi, jieshou shi yu yishu shiyu zhong de 'Jing Ke ci Qin'—Haiwai Hanxue de duochong shijiao" 翻譯、接受史與藝術視域中的"荊軻刺秦"——海外漢學的多重視角, *Yuwai Hanji yanjiu jikan* 26, (2023), 115–38.

[144]Scholarship of the Wu Liang Shrine has flourished since the late 1980s. See Wilma Fairbank, "The Offering Shrines of 'Wu Liang Tz'u'," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6.1 (1941), 1–36; Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Jean M. James, "The Iconographic Program of the Wu Family Offering Shrines (A.D. 151–ca. 170)," *Artibus*

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To enhance studies of the *huaxiang shi*, Anthony J. Barbieri-Low discussed the examples in the Wu Liang shrine in Shandong province, in Yi'nan prefecture in Shandong, in Tanghe prefecture in Henan, and in Leshan in Sichuan, all of which emphasize Jing Ke's loyalty and righteousness.[145] The following section builds on previous scholarship to describe several representative images from different regions, such as Shandong, Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Zhejiang provinces, to closely read their content and examine their characteristics to gain a better understanding the reception of the Jing Ke lore in this fine arts form.

First, the depiction (Appendix Figure 5) on the north side of the west wall in the middle chamber of the Han Tomb in Yinan 沂南, Shandong Province, captures the essence of the story with a concise composition. The key elements of the pillar, the dagger, the King of Qin, Jing Ke, and the torn sleeve are portrayed, albeit with fewer figures and less detail. In the center of the scene, a slender pillar takes prominence. The King of Qin and Jing Ke are positioned close to each other on the right side of the pillar, engaged in a fierce struggle. A slender and agile Jing Ke launches an attack on the bloated and startled King of Qin. The King of Qin stands frozen in fear, his posture rigid. Meanwhile, Jing Ke's clothing and belt are depicted fluttering, imbuing the scene with a sense of movement and dynamism, and capturing the fleeting instant of action. It is noteworthy that this depiction of Jing Ke diverges from the tall and heroic depictions seen elsewhere. Instead, he is depicted as thin, emphasizing his association with the barbarian. Furthermore, Jing Ke is depicted wearing bandit-like attire, adding a somewhat scandalous element to the portrayal.

Second, the image of "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" (Appendix Figure 21) on the west wall of the main north-south room of Nanyang Knitwear Factory 南陽針織廠 in Henan province shows Jing Ke leaning forward to attack with his dagger, and the king of Qin hastily preparing to stand up and respond with his sword. Jing Ke is on the right side of the picture and is shown in a frontal view. Jing Ke stands on powerful legs, with the hem of his coat raised in a chivalrous and righteous manner, with his coat sash floating in the air and with his dagger thrusting at the King of Qin. On his left is the King of Qin, who appears shorter in comparison. At this point, Jing Ke takes a dagger and stabs the King of Qin, who leans to his right to avoid the thrust. The image exaggerates the length of Jing Ke's dagger. Jing Ke's sleeve is cut off in mid-air. The King of Qin has drawn his sword and holds it in his right hand. The figure on the far left of the picture is harder to identify. His arms and legs are splayed open. He is unlikely to be Qin Wuyang, who was already trembling with fear once Jing Ke began his attack. This figure could be the imperial physician Xia Wuju with his medicine box, ready to throw it at Jing Ke, or he could be a member of the king's guards. In

Asiae 49.1/2 (1988–1989), 39–72; Liu Xingzhen and Yue Fengxia, *Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs—The Wu Family Shrines in Shandong Province* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1991); Jia Qingchao 賈慶超, *Wushi ci Hanhua shike kaoping* 武氏祠漢畫石刻考評 (Jinan: Shandong daxue, 1993); Cary Y. Liu, Anthony Barbieri-Low, and Michael Nylan, eds., *Recarving China's Past: Art, Archaeology, and Architecture of the "Wu Family Shrines"* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Cary Y. Liu, ed., *Rethinking Recarving: Ideals, Practices, and Problems of the "Wu Family Shrines" and Han China* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2008). Anthony Barbieri-Low has designed a digital Wu Liang Shrine, see Computer Reconstruction of the Wu Family Cemetery, https://barbierilow.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/?page_id=166, accessed on November 10, 2022.

[145]Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China*, 135–41.

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comparison with the other *huaxiang shi*, the pillar in the center is missing, and the overall sense of dynamism is strong.

Third, the "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" portrait (Appendix Figure 7) in the cliff tomb of Mahao in Sichuan province. The image is divided into different sections by pillars. In the middle section, there is a pillar with daggers inserted into it. The right side of the image depicts Jing Ke and the left side depicts the King of Qin. On the right side, a king's guard is holding Jing Ke, while another two guards stand at the left side of the king. The compartment on the right shows a case that holds the head of General Fan. The figures' movements and positions reflect the character of each man and create a dynamic narrative. The direction of Jing Ke's hair suggests that the image depicts the moment Jing Ke was grabbed by the guard. His headdress has already fallen off, and he is in a ferocious attacking posture, still struggling to free himself. He has just thrown his dagger, which pierces and passes through the pillar but does not hurt the King of Qin. The king's sleeve has been cut away, but he has raised his sword in defense, and taken several large steps back. The frightened guards of Qin have fled in a panic, scurrying away. Qin Wuyang on the far-right side crouches timidly, cowering on the ground. In front of him is the case that holds General Fan's head.

Fourth, the portrait of "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" (Appendix Figure 20) in Haining 海寧 Middle School of Haining in Zhejiang province is indistinct, but when compared to other portraits, it possesses a stronger sense of dynamics while maintaining exquisite details. The pillar remains at the center of the composition. On the right side of the pillar, Jing Ke is depicted attempting to seize the King of Qin and break through the protective barrier of his guard. Qin Wuyang, positioned next to Jing Ke, is shown kneeling in a curled-up posture. While his body is on the ground, his head is slightly raised, suggesting that he is observing the unfolding assassination scene. The depiction of Qin Wuyang is slightly different from that of other *huaxiang shi*, in which his head is completely lowered in terror. On the left side of the pillar, the King of Qin raises his arms and flings his sleeves, taking flying steps to dodge the attack. At his feet lies the case containing General Fan's head. The identity of the person on the left of the King of Qin is a subject of scholarly debate. Some scholars argue that it is Xia Wuju depicted bowing and throwing a medicine bag at Jing Ke,[146] but the medicine bag is not visible in the picture. Considering the leftmost figures in other *huaxiang shi*, it is likely that the person on the left of the King of Qin is a frightened guard who was unprepared by the sudden attack.

As discussed above, most extant *huaxiang shi* related to Jing Ke lore share a similar content and layout. The paintings are centered on a pillar. On one side of the pillar is a magnificent, tall Jing Ke with his sash floating in the air, the trembling Qin Wuyang kneeling curled up on the ground, and the head of Fan Wuqi presented in an open container. On the other side is the King of Qin, fleeing the assassin in a panic. Jing Ke is often shown facing the viewer in the posture of a chivalrous warrior, with his legs standing strongly apart and the hem of his coat raised, held back by a Qin warrior right after having thrown the dagger. The King of Qin, by way of contrast, looks battered and exhausted by his flight.

[146]Yue Fengxia 岳鳳霞 and Liu Xingzhen 劉興珍, "Zhejiang Haining Chang'an zhen huaxiang shi" 浙江海寧長安鎮畫像石, *Wenwu* 1984.3, 47–53.

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The similarities among these depictions are due to how *huaxiang shi* are produced and how carving knowledge and skills were shared. A certain popular style and set of carving techniques for *huaxiang shi* emerged during the Western Han dynasty and quickly spread across regions, thus producing consistency in composition, expression, and carving methods.[147] The production of *huaxiang shi* was complex manufacturing process consisting of six major steps: planning and design, selecting and processing stones, drawing the base, carving the pictures, and coloring the images.[148] Practitioners received special training and there was a set, unified style for the composition and layout of the paintings—uniform to the point where some painters developed mnemonics to remember guidelines. The Han *huaxiang shi* have certain sets of frames which are stable and generally taken from the core plot of the story. As Xing Yitian 邢義田 states, the *huaxiang shi* have a stable grid set for production, though there are variations in the process of painting images.[149] This standard production procedure was responsible for the stylistic uniformity and consistency in content seen in the extant *huaxiang shi*. Furthermore, Barbieri-Low explains the similar layout and depictions appearing in both northern and southern regions by speculating that the southern carvers learned these compositions from their northern counterparts, but did not fully understand every detail, resulting in a great degree of similarity with some discrepancies in style.[150] All the extant *huaxiang shi* of Jing Ke's assassination attempt demonstrate a high degree of consistency with some small discrepancies due to the functions and levels of detail of the different *huaxiang shi*.

Jing Ke paintings decorated not only tombs but also ancestral halls. These were spiritual places which connected family members, ancestors, and descendants, and encouraged living family members to actively reflect on the past for the benefit of the future of the family and clan. Ancestral halls also reflect defining characteristics and the overall strength of the family, thus shaping family and clan tradition. The ancestral hall is therefore a place to celebrate moral values of the family or the individual. A representative example is the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall, located in Jiaxiang 嘉祥 prefecture of Jining 濟寧 city in Shandong province. It consists of sacrificial halls, constructed in the Wu family graveyard during the late Eastern Han Dynasty, featuring exquisite engravings. Fortunately, this hall has been preserved and restored. Three pictorial stones are about the Jing Ke lore, among which Appendix Figure 3 is the best-known and most artistically refined. The scene is divided into two parts by a bronze pillar at the center. On the right side, the King of Qin is depicted leaning back unsteadily in a defensive posture. On the left side, Jing Ke is shown with his hair

[147]Zhu Cunming 朱存明, "Lun Han huaxiang shi de diyu fenbu ji tezheng" 論漢畫像石的地域分佈及特徵, *Difang wenhua yanjiu* 1 (2013), 14–22.

[148]Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in Early Imperial China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 83–96; Song Weijian 宋維建 and Wang Xiaoling 王曉苓, "Han huaxiang shi de jiben zhizuo guocheng—yi Shandong Yinan Hanhuaxiang shi weili" 漢畫像石的基本製作過程——以山東沂南漢畫像石爲例, *Zhongguo wenyijia* 2018.6, 62.

[149]Xing Yitian 邢義田, "Getao, bangti, wenxian yu huaxiang jieshi—yi yige shichuan de 'qinü weifu baochou' Hanhua gushi weili" 格套、榜題、文獻與畫像解釋——以一個失傳的 "七女爲父報仇" 漢畫故事爲例, in *Zhongshiji yiqian de diyu wenhua, zongjiao yu yishu* 中世紀以前的地域文化、宗教與藝術, ed. Xing Yitian (Taibei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 2002), 183–234.

[150]Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China*, 139.

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disheveled and his headdress slightly askew, conveying the strong emotional moment. Wu Hung speculates that Jing Ke's headdress may have fallen off during his struggle with the King of Qin.[151] Alternatively, the headdress may have intentionally been depicted as falling off to emphasize Jing Ke's bravery and fury at that moment. The presence of this headdress serves as a visual representation of this intense expression. A similar scene is also found in the story of Lin Xiangru's 藺相如 (fl. 279 BCE) meeting with King Zhaoxiang 昭襄 of Qin (r. 306–251 BCE).

Another pictorial stone of "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" (Appendix Figure 2) in the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall was not as well preserved and clear as Appendix Figure 3—in particular the upper left portion of the image is somewhat worn—but the general composition is still visible. Unlike Appendix Figure 3, here Jing Ke is depicted surrounded by two guards. One guard is holding onto Jing Ke, preventing him from escaping, while the other guard is poised to strike him, with a shield in his left hand and a raised sword in his right hand. The tension and imminent danger are palpable in their stances. Additional guards can be seen around the King of Qin. The two guards on the left side of the king are visibly terrified and are attempting to flee or prostrating themselves on the ground. The King of Qin himself is shown ducking and dodging, trying to evade any potential harm. His image is noticeably larger than those of the guards, emphasizing his position of power and authority. Another guard, standing next to the King of Qin, is depicted holding a shield, ready to defend himself and the king. This detail highlights the protective measures taken by the Qin court.

Jean M. James has extensively analyzed the content of the three images in the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall (Appendix Figures 1–3) that relate to the story of Jing Ke, emphasizing the tense scene of Jing Ke stabbing the King of Qin and the latter fleeing around the pillar upon seeing the dagger.[152] These images of Jing Ke in the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall symbolize loyalty and integrity. Judging from these images, despite the failure of his attempt to assassinate the King of Qin, Jing Ke's sacrifice for Prince Dan and disregard for his own life established him as a model of loyalty and earned him widespread recognition. The story of Jing Ke therefore served an educational purpose within the Wu Liang Ancestral Hall.[153] Wu Hung's monograph on the topic also discusses the Jing Ke *huaxiang shi*, providing a summary of the "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" story within the context of the *Shi ji* and the *Zhanguo ce*. Furthermore, Wu explains the content of the images by comparing them with written narratives to identify the discrepancies between those narratives and the images. For example, the depiction of Jing Ke's dagger piercing through the pillar in the *huaxiang shi* strays from the account provided by *Shi ji*. Citing Wang Chong's *Lunheng*, Wu argues that certain books on Ru thought during the Eastern Han period already contained similar accounts of the episode, accounts which these images likely reflected. Wu believes that it is likely that the tomb owner cherished history, as the hall is filled with depictions of historical and mythical characters: daughters, filial sons, wise brothers, close friends, loyal servants, benevolent people, assassins, and loyal subjects.[154]

[151]Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, 318.
[152]James, "The Iconographic Program of the Wu Family Offering Shrines (A.D. 151–ca. 170)," 39–72.
[153]James, "The Iconographic Program of the Wu Family Offering Shrines (A.D. 151–ca. 170)," 46–47.
[154]Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, 142–48.

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The content of the Jing Ke story as depicted in the *huaxiang shi* is slightly different from the story as presented in the transmitted materials. Although both versions are concerned with Jing Ke's bravery, the *huaxiang shi* in tombs emphasize physical bravery, while the transmitted texts may discuss the broader cultural significance of bravery, such as its connection with righteousness. The *huaxiang shi* were usually carved on stone tombs and sarcophagi and were not intended to be displayed to the public sphere, but instead were supposed to protect the deceased. As Lydia Thompson argues, it was thought that the valor and bravery of a warrior like Jing Ke would serve to guard the tomb.[155] Barbieri-Low echoes Thompson's understanding of this function of *huaxiang shi* depicting Jing Ke in tombs, and believes the image was especially used in this way when it was placed at a prominent location in a tomb. From the perspective of those tomb commissioners who valued his bravery, Jing Ke's conduct was heroic and righteous. For example, in the *huaxiang shi* of Tanghe (Appendix Figure 21), Jing Ke is shown in the posture of a warrior, and the scene has a strong sense of dynamics, with Jing Ke extending his dagger to the King of Qin's neck as the latter tries to escape. They largely emphasize the bravery of Jing Ke and the distress of the King of Qin. Dramatic bravery is a mainstay not only of Jing Ke *huaxiang shi* but also *huaxiang shi* in general. For instance, "Er tao sha san shi" 二桃殺三士 (Two Peaches Killing Three Warriors) and "Gaozu zhanshe" 高祖斬蛇 (Emperor Gaozu Killing Snakes) were also common themes for *huaxiangshi* in tombs.[156] However, bravery is a quality that often needs to be demonstrated in a conflict, and Ru thought sought to mitigate conflict. Unlike the *huaxiang shi* in tombs, which were concealed underground, the scholars' records of and commentaries on Jing Ke were public and often understood as political, so scholars had to be cautious about how they discussed bravery in their writings.

Another important difference in the representation of "Jing Ke ci Qinwang" in transmitted and in excavated materials is that whereas the former describes Jing Ke throwing his dagger towards the King of Qin and simply hitting a pillar, the latter (i.e., Appendix Figures 2, 3, 4), shows the dagger fully penetrating through the pillar. Was Jing Ke strong enough to make the dagger pierce the bronze pillar? Wu Hung agrees with Wang that this image is an expressive embellishment of the Jing Ke lore.[157] Modern archaeological discoveries suggest that the Qin dynasty palace was made of a mixture of earth and wood, and most of its pillars were wooden and placed on top of the foundation stones.[158] This finding gives us a new understanding of the nature of the pillar. It was likely made of wood, precisely tung wood, and so "bronze pillar" *tongzhu* 銅柱 is likely a corruption of "tung pillar" *tongzhu* 桐柱. While it might seem impossible that a dagger would penetrate a *chi* deep into a bronze pillar, it might be possible for a wooden pillar.

[155]Lydia Thompson, "Confucian Paragon or Popular Deity? Legendary Heroes in a Late—Eastern Han Tomb," *Asia Major* (3rd ser.) 12 (1999), 1–38.

[156]Zhang Wenjing 張文靖, "Lun Handai mushi huaxiang shi zhong sange lishi ticai de bixie zhenmu gongyong" 論漢代墓室畫像石中三個歷史題材的辟邪鎮墓功用, in *Zhongguo Hanhua xuehui dijiujie nianhui lunwen ji (shang)* 中國漢畫學會第九屆年會論文集（上), ed. Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui, 2004), 304–43.

[157]Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, 319.

[158]Liu Qingzhu 劉慶柱 and Chen Guoying 陳國英, "Qindu Xianyang diyihao gongdian jianzhu yizhi jianbao" 秦都咸陽第一號宮殿建築遺址簡報, *Wenwu* 1976.11, 12–24, 41, 95–97.

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The third noticeable difference is that in the *huaxiang shi*, a guard is holding Jing Ke (see Appendix Figures 7, 11, and 12), preventing him from committing the assassination. The transmitted texts do not describe any such intervention. As matter of fact, Qin law prohibited anyone with a weapon from entering the court. As the *Zhanguo ce* records, "It was the law in Qin that groups of courtiers in the court were not allowed to hold even short weapons. The imperial guards with weapons all took their positions outside the main hall." (秦法，羣臣侍殿上者，不得持尺兵。諸郎中執兵，皆陳殿下).[159] If there were no warriors in the main hall, how could one get hold of Jing Ke so quickly?

The fourth major difference between the transmitted texts and the *huaxiang shi* concerns Qin Wuyang. The transmitted texts record that Qin Wuyang trembled in the Qin court, so he was not allowed to enter the hall to approach the king. However, in the *huaxiang shi* (see Appendix Figures 18, 19, and 20), Qin Wuyang appears next to Jing Ke. These *huaxiang shi* also depict Qin Wuyang as much smaller than the other figures, and he is often huddled, crouching, or prostrating on the ground. The contrast between Jing Ke and the other two figures highlights the superior courage of Jing Ke. The *huaxiang shi* is an exaggeration of the historical narrative, reflecting how Jing Ke's assassination attempt was understood outside of official contexts.

Conclusion

The lore of Jing Ke has been widely circulated from its inception to the present day. Its basic appeal is clear: the story of Jing Ke is dramatic, and furthermore, the target of his assassination was the future emperor, Qin Shihuang. The *Shi ji*, *Zhanguo ce*, and *Yan Danzi* have detailed accounts of Jing Ke and his actions. As the story spread and was expanded, it was cited in texts with very different images of Jing Ke and very different interpretations of his actions, all of which contributed to his complex image. This article therefore comprehensively investigates the reception of Jing Ke's assassination attempt in early Chinese culture as reflected in political essays, philosophical treatises, and histories as well as excavated materials such as *huaxiang shi*. The way Han officials and those buried in Han tombs made use of the story of Jing Ke not only reveals how the story has evolved, but also the philosophical views of members of the Han official class, and the intellectual and socio-political environment in which they lived.

There are three different levels to the reception of Jing Ke lore in early China. The *Shi ji* provides several accounts of the assassination attempt. The account in the "Cike liezhuan" is the most comprehensive and detailed, and it has exerted enormous influence over later understandings of the Jing Ke story. In addition to this account, the histories of the various states also include multiple accounts with several subtle differences among them. The first is whether the Qin king was aware of the assassination plot in advance, which is related to his image; the second is the role played by King Xi of Yan in the plot; and the third is the depiction of other characters such as Qin Wuyang and Fan Wuqi. The Qin-oriented passages, such as the biographies of the First Emperor and Qin generals, downplay the assassination

[159]Liu Xiang 劉向, *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1985), 31.1139.

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attempt, and in so doing, glorify the image of the king and make the Qin state appear stronger. A depiction that indicates his awareness of the plot elevates the image of the King of Qin and de-emphasizes his initial panic and embarrassment. Passages associated with other states, however, complement the main historical narrative of the Jing Ke story in the "Cike liezhuan" by including such details as the lethargy of the King of Yan and his betrayal of his vows. In addition, the *Shi ji* elaborates on secondary characters such as Qin Wuyang and Fan Wuqi in other passages, which helps complete the narrative. "Cike liezhuan" itself provides a comprehensive account of the assassination events, and the intertextual approach adopted in the *Shi ji* further enriches the story. Other accounts are more abbreviated than the main narrative of the "Cike liezhuan," but they overall provide rich material for the dissemination of the story of Jing Ke. The very existence of these multiple accounts confirms the wide circulation of the story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt in early China.

As the Jing Ke lore was transmitted, it was further embellished, making it even more popular. Han scholars discussing the Jing Ke lore mainly focused on the problem of the ritual propriety and righteousness of Jing Ke's actions. Han scholars criticized the assassination attempt as a local challenge to authority, private revenge that undermined the greater good, and in the case of Liu An, as literally out of tune with good governance. These scholars judged Jing Ke's actions out of concern for a Han empire in which centralized government and the proper administration of justice were threatened by powerful regions and individuals. There are also discourses in the Han Dynasty that understand Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate the King of Qin as a demonstration of Jing Ke's loyalty and righteousness. Zou Yang's letter from prison to Prince Liang fully affirms these good qualities, as does Wang Chong's *Lunheng* and Wang Fu's *Qianfu lun*.

The debates recorded in the *Yantie lun* contain both positive and negative views of Jing Ke. The *dafu*, represented by Sang Hongyang, affirmed the courage of Jing Ke and believed that the state should replenish weapons and use assassins like Jing Ke to subdue the Xiongnu. At the other end of the spectrum were the *wenxue*, who criticized Jing Ke's use of violence and subterfuge to solve the problems of the state. The *wenxue* instead advocated for the use of moral cultivation and probity to influence the Xiongnu, so that the Han Empire could win without fighting. Looking deeper, the *dafu* such as Sang Hongyang represented the interests of central government, and therefore favored consolidating the frontier by any means necessary. The *wenxue* scholars, on the other hand, held a negative view of the destabilizing potential of assassination as a tactic. Like the other Han scholars who condemned Jing Ke, they viewed the act as violent and unrighteousness. The *dafu* and *wenxue* demonstrate the wide range of attitudes toward Jing Ke's actions well into the Han.

Another debated aspect of the lore of Jing Ke's assassination attempt were the details associated with the event that seemed improbable, impossible, or cosmic. Some questioned whether the cosmic phenomena mentioned in the story, such as "millet raining from the sky" or "a white rainbow crossing the sun," did indeed happen. It was also disputed whether Gao Jianli, in his attempt to seek vengeance for Jing Ke, managed to injure the King of Qin, whether Jing Ke threw his dagger into a pillar in the Qin court so hard that it penetrated one *chi* deep, and the extent of the collective punishment doled out for Jing Ke's assassination attempt. *Shi ji*'s many references to

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the cosmic phenomena associated with the event and Ying Shao's search for reasonable explanations for these cosmic phenomena demonstrate that these legends were already popular in the Han Dynasty. Late Western Han figures such as Yang Xiong, and Eastern Han Figures, such as Wang Chong, strongly rejected these accounts because they suggested a correlation between natural phenomena and human actions. Wang and Yang felt correlative theories like *tianren ganying* and the theory of *yin* and *yang*, which reached their peak of popularity near the end of the Western Han, threatened the consolidation of imperial power. The frequent natural disasters in the Eastern Han threw these prophetic doctrines into doubt, causing many scholars to seek to restore the original Ru thought and write books condemning geomancy, *feng shui*, and other cosmic claims.

Accounts of whether Gao Jianli wounded the First Emperor and how the emperor died vary, with some accounts claiming that Gao mortally wounded the emperor. Gao's assassination of the First Emperor circulated along with the story of Jing Ke, and like the detail of Jing Ke throwing the dagger into a bronze pillar one *chi* deep, it tended to glorify the images of Gao Jianli and Jing Ke. The increasing severity of the punishment of Jing Ke—from executing his kin to the seventh degree to executing his kin to the ninth degree, and even slaughtering his fellow villagers—was probably an exaggeration to bolster the anti-Qin image of the First Emperor as a particularly cruel and harsh ruler, and thereby lend legitimacy to the Han.

In addition to the transmitted texts discussed above, the lore of Jing Ke also appears in excavated materials, including the frescoes of ancestral halls and the gates and walls of underground tombs. Compared with the transmitted texts, the excavated materials celebrate Jing Ke's bravery, and openly mock the King of Qin. *Huaxiang shi* were very popular as a form of tomb art between the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty and the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The compositional expression and carving methods are consistent because of a mature and standardized *huaxiang shi* industry during the Han, in which skills were handed down from generation to generation, spread rapidly across regions, and famous masters emerged who were much imitated.[160]

The *huaxiang shi* paintings generally highlight Jing Ke's bravery, loyalty, trustworthiness, and commitment to justice, and provide the vilified image of the King of Qin to serve as contrast. This bias may reflect the anti-Qin ideology of the Han dynasty, but it also reflects the rise of private vengeance during the Eastern Han. In addition, the portrayal of the details of Jing Ke's story in the *huaxiang shi* deviates to some extent from the historical records. Unlike the transmitted texts, the *huaxiang shi* depict the piercing of a bronze pillar with a dagger, the presence of armed men with weapons in the Qin court, and Qin Wuyang accompanying Jing Ke into the court. These details further emphasize Jing Ke's extraordinary courage. The divergence of folk images of Jing Ke in the *huaxiang shi* from the image presented in the transmitted materials reflects the discrepancy between intellectual thought and folk beliefs during the Han.

[160]Yang Aiguo 楊愛國, "Handai huaxiang shi chanye lian yanjiu" 漢代畫像石產業鏈研究, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 2023.1, 75–84.

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Jing Ke's assassination attempt was a violent act that threatened governance and unification. As such, it was not acceptable according to state ideology or according to official law that prohibited private vengeance. Scholars therefore had to be cautious when writing about it and generally condemned Jing Ke's actions. As works of art carved on stone tombs or sarcophagi, Han *huaxiang shi* were not public statements; they reflected a folk tradition that admired Jing Ke's personal bravery, loyalty, faith, and righteousness. This tradition interprets Jing Ke's act as reflecting his bravery and loyalty to Crown Prince Dan and does not focus on the violence of his actions. Jing Ke was considered a proper subject for *huaxiang shi* along with loyal subjects, filial sons, and other worthies who reflect Ru thought. Jing Ke's image in folk beliefs was thus largely positive, and the popular narratives were different from those presented in texts transmitted by elites. The combination of both transmitted and excavated sources reveals a complex image of Jing Ke constructed by both the state and the people, in both text and in art.

追憶失敗的刺客：早期荆軻故事的生成與建構

張月

提要

關於荆軻故事的早期接受，學者們的研究大多側重《史記·刺客列傳》《戰國策·燕策》《燕丹子》這三部重要典籍。大部分的討論都圍繞著三者記載的異同、人物性格的塑造、荆軻刺秦王的動機以及對燕太子丹謀劃的闡釋等方面，但仍有大量其它的早期傳世文獻和出土材料尚未在先秦兩漢的文化視域內加以詳論。本文採用跨學科的視角，從文學、歷史、哲學、考古與藝術史等維度集中分析這一時期對荊軻形象生成起作用的典籍。本文也探討了分佈在中國各地棺槨墓葬及祠廟中的荆軻圖像內容及其異同，同時考察了這些荆軻圖像與傳世文本中荆軻故事的差異並揭示其原因。通過對傳世文獻及出土材料的分析，本文深入發掘這一既具有影響力也飽受爭議的人物在早期生成與建構的過程，這不僅涉及上層文人的話語與寫作，也關涉民間文化和藝術的呈現，更可管窺早期中國社會政治、文學及思想史的變遷。

荆軻，秦王（秦始皇），刺殺，傳世文獻，出土材料，早期接受

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Appendix: Pictorial Stones (*huaxiang shi* 畫像石) of "Jing Ke ci Qinwang." Note: The sources of all the Jing Ke related *huaxiang shi* are provided in the footnotes.

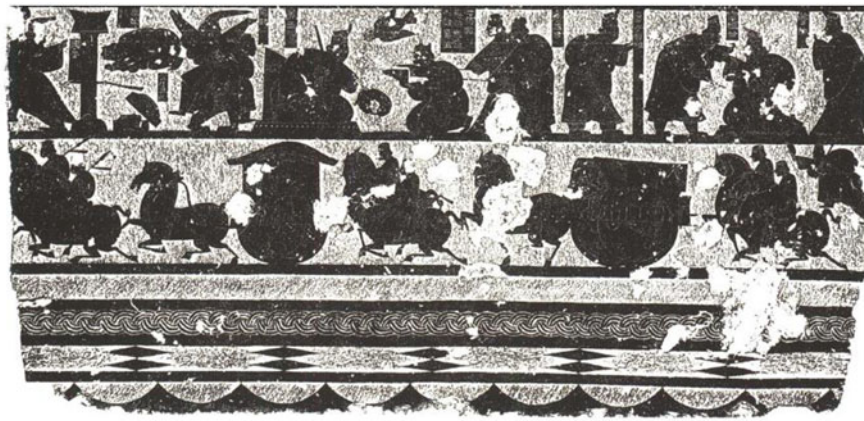

Figure 1. Wu Liang Shrine 1, the first one in the first row from the left.

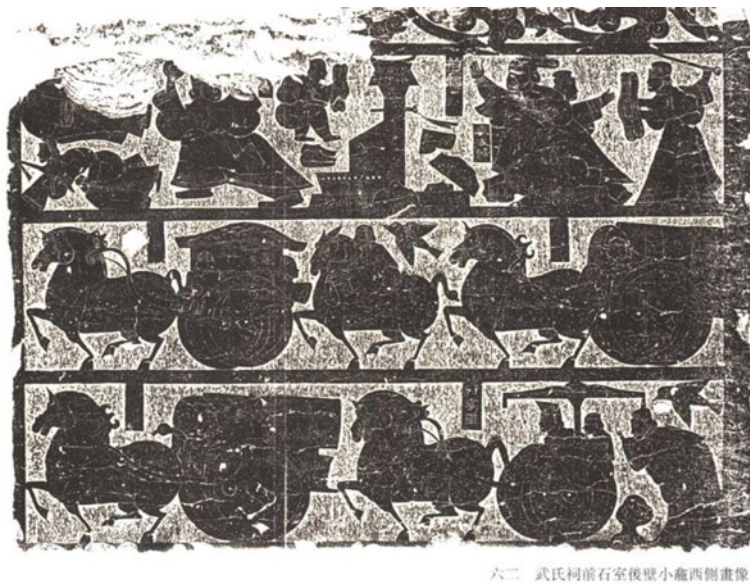

Figure 2. Wu Liang Shrine 2, the first one in the first row from the left.

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Figure 3. Wu Liang Shrine 3.

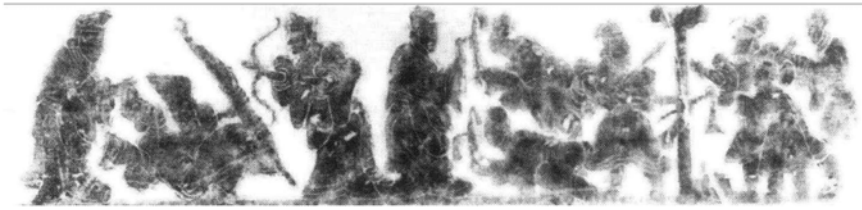

Figure 4. Nanyang 南陽 in Weishan 微山 Prefecture, the first scene from the right.

Figure 5. Han Tomb of Beizhai village 北寨村 in Yi'nan 沂南 Prefecture.

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Figure 6. Tomb No. 1 of Balimiao 八里廟 in Yanggu 陽谷 Prefecture.

Figure 7. AM1 of Mahao 麻浩 in Leshan 樂山.

Figure 8. Tomb No. 40 of Mahao in Leshan (a photograph by Hu Xueyuan 胡學元).

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Figure 9. BM19 of Mahao in Leshan.

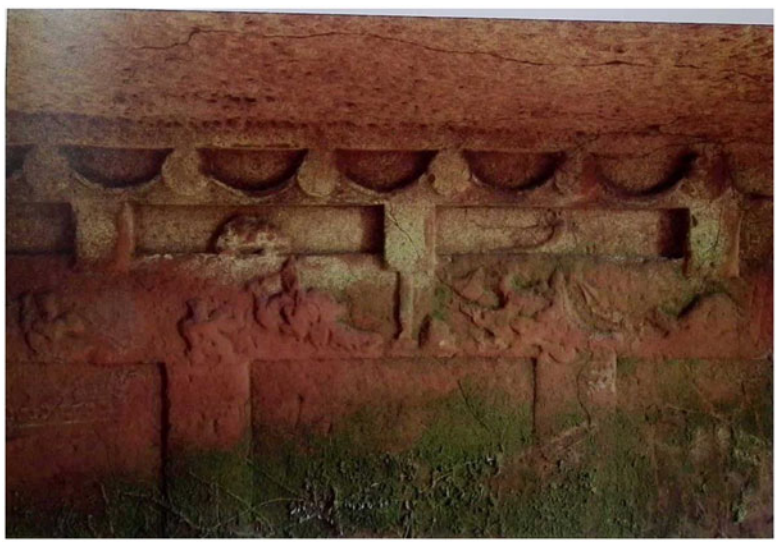

Figure 10. BM101 of Mahao in Leshan.

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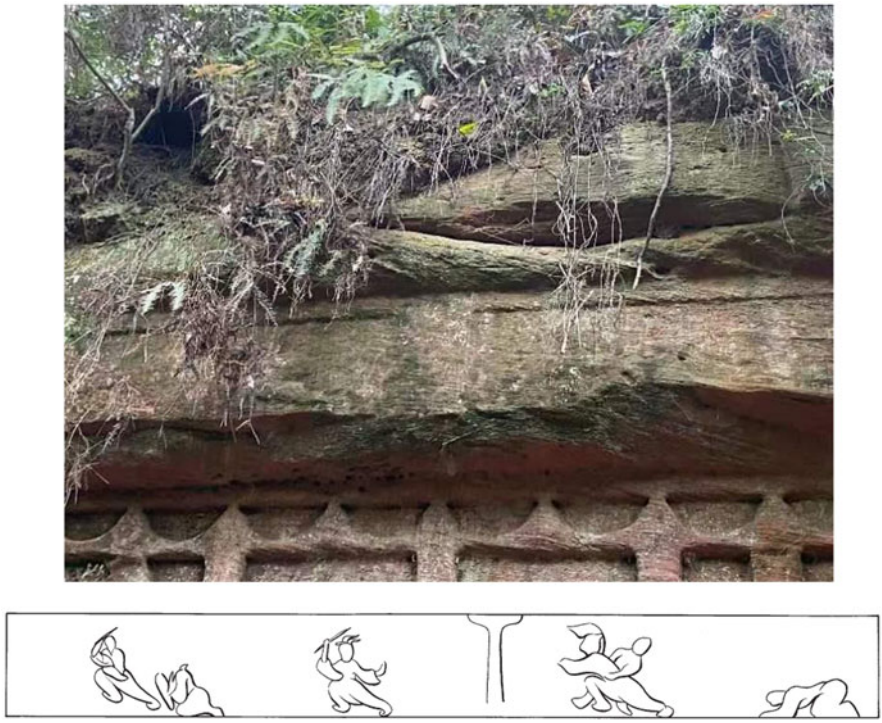

Figure 11. Tomb No. 1 of Shiziwan 柿子灣 in Leshan.

Figure 12. Tomb No. 22 of Shiziwan in Leshan (a photograph of Hu Xueyuan).

Figure 13. Han Tomb of Hechuan 合川 Village in Chongqing.

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Figure 14. Sarcophagus No. 2 of the Wei-Jin tomb in Jiang'an 江安 Prefecture.

Figure 15. Qu prefecture 渠縣.

Figure 16. Siyang Dagudun 泗陽打鼓墩.

Figure 17. Gaochun Gucheng 高淳固城.

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Figure 18. Suide 綏德 village.

Figure 19. Dabaodang 大保當 in Shenmu 神木.

Figure 20. East Wall of the Front Room of the Han Tomb in Haining 海寧.

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Figure 21. Tanghe 唐河 of Nanyang in Henan.

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