

A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited

In the turbulent history of the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國) period (453–221 BC), few occurrences can match the oddity of the attempted assassination of king Zheng 政 of Qin 秦. In the year 227 BC, prince Dan 太子丹, the heir-apparent of the northeastern state of Yan 燕, dispatched his trusted retainer, Jing Ke 荊軻, to assassinate the king of Qin to avert the imminent conquest of Yan by Qin. The assassination attempt failed, serving as an excellent pretext for the eventual annihilation of Yan. In addition, king Zheng reportedly wiped out Jing Ke's kin to the seventh degree, and, possibly also the entire ruling family of the state of Yan. In 221, king Zheng successfully concluded his effort to unify All-under-Heaven under Qin's aegis, proclaiming himself the First Emperor (Shi Huangdi 始皇帝, literally "The First August Thearch"; r. 221–210 BC), thereby inaugurating a new era in Chinese history.¹

Despite Jing Ke's failure, his postmortem glory rivaled that of his purported victim, the First Emperor. Already in the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), Jing Ke was immortalized in a semiofficial biography, in a series of anecdotes, in eulogies, and in stone carvings in elite tombs; later, a town, a mountain and a pagoda were named for him, while numerous shrines and putative tombs of Jing Ke mushroomed throughout northern China. He became the hero of poems written by as divergent personalities as the illustrious Han poet Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BC), the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor (1736–1795) and the female revolutionary martyr, Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907). Recently, Jing Ke's glory was celebrated in a television series and in several movies, including those by the leading Mainland directors, Chen Kaige 陳凱歌

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¹ For the outline of the story, see Sima Qian 司馬遷 et al., *Shiji* 史記, annot. Zhang Shoujie 張守節, Sima Zhen 司馬貞, and Pei Yin 裴駟 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997) 86, pp. 2526–38; 6, p. 233; 34, p. 1561. For the extermination of Jing Ke's kin, see *Shiji* 83, p. 2475; for the possibility that the entire ruling family of the state of Yan was wiped out, see Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1233–1296), *Tongjian da wen* 通鑑答問, *Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, digital edn. (hereafter, SKQS) 2, p. 25.

and Zhang Yimou 張藝謀. His story was also converted into a novel, operas, *manga* comics, and even a computer game. All these perpetuate Jing Ke's memory well into the third millennium since his death.

Why was the failed assassin immortalized and glorified? For many modern observers the answer appears to be self-evident. Jing Ke's purported victim, the First Emperor of Qin, is widely considered as an exemplar "evil ruler," recently described in a popular website as a "megalomaniac... obsessed with unifying all of China, ... who embarks upon an unparalleled reign of terror and brutality."² Looked at from this perspective, Jing Ke's courageous act appears as an example of tyrannicide, which is considered a legitimate and laudable act in Western political traditions. This explanation, however, ignores the fact that while Chinese political tradition approved of a righteous rebellion, it lacked the notion of legitimate regicide, however terrible the reigning monarch was. Therefore, the vast majority of the imperial literati, as I shall demonstrate below, deplored Jing Ke's act on moral and political grounds; indeed, if we modernize traditional Chinese discourse, Jing Ke could well be designated a "terrorist," a person who resorts to unauthorized violence to attain political goals.³ Yet denigration of Jing Ke's deed never diminished the exaltation of his courage and deep sympathy for his determination and self-sacrifice.

Was Jing Ke indeed a hero or a murderous villain? In what follows, I shall try to prove that he was, in fact, both, and that he was highly esteemed not because of any moral or political righteousness of his act, but *despite* the evident lack thereof. To explain how and why one of the earliest Chinese "terrorists" became a hero, I analyze distinct modes of commemoration of Jing Ke throughout the imperial millennia and then elucidate the negative political assessment of his act. In conclusion, I propose an explanation for the ongoing adoration of a failed assassin. The goal of this discussion will be not only to demonstrate the split between heroism and moral appropriateness in traditional China, but also to highlight an important anti-hierarchical undercurrent in traditional Chinese political culture. I shall end with

² This phrase is taken from one of the standard introductions to Chen Kaige's "The Emperor and the Assassin"; <<http://www.afi.com/onscreen/AFIFEST/1999/films/os/emperor.html>>.

³ With so many definitions of terrorism, here I do not engage in the polemics about its applicability to Jing Ke or other famous assassins in Chinese history; suffice it to say that the equation has been made by several modern Chinese scholars whose views are surveyed in the Epilogue to this article. For a systematic comparison of China's assassin-retainers tradition and modern terrorism, see Li Ling 李零, "Zhongguo lishi shang de kongbuzhuyi: cisha he jiechi" 中國歷史上的恐怖主義, 刺殺和劫持, in idem, *Hua jian yi hu jiu* 花間一壺酒 (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 2005), pp. 77-99.

a brief analysis of the difficulty of modern commemorators to preserve the traditional paradox of adoring Jing Ke while recognizing the moral ambiguity of his act.

THE ASSASSINATION

Anecdotes about Jing Ke began circulating shortly after he failed to assassinate the king of Qin, but it was the *Shiji* 史記 biography, which became a milestone along Jing Ke's road to immortality. This literary masterpiece by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BC) (or, possibly, by his father, Sima Tan 司馬談; d. 110 BC), incorporated in his “Biographies of Assassin-Retainers,” has been translated several times into English and other European languages; I shall therefore confine my discussion to a brief summary of the biography.⁴ It has decisively shaped the image of Jing Ke in the eyes of posterity.

According to the *Shiji*, Jing Ke came from the tiny state of Wei 衛, where he “loved to read books and studied swordsmanship.” He failed to make a notable career, and traveled from one state to another, enjoying friendship of “worthy and powerful men” throughout the Chinese world. In the state of Yan, he made friends with a dog butcher and with Gao Jianli 高漸離, a skillful *zhu* 筑 (a type of zither) player, drinking with them at the marketplace and amusing himself, “as if there was nobody around.” Despite this unimpressive background, one of Jing Ke's friends, Tian Guang 田光, recommended him to the heir-apparent of Yan, who was seeking ways through which he could save his state from the hands of Qin.

The *Shiji* text depicts the heir-apparent of Yan, prince Dan, as an intemperate leader, whose hatred of Qin was fueled both by the fear of Qin annexation of his state and by personal offense inflicted upon him by the king of Qin. Dan rejected the clever advice of his tutor, Ju Wu 鞠武, to avoid confrontation with the powerful Qin, and instead sought immediate revenge. While politically inept, Dan possessed a strong will and, moreover, excelled in attracting worthy retainers. Being unable

⁴ For a list of English translations, see “Translator's Note” in William H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records. Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994), p. 334. See also a translation by Rudolf V. Viatkin, trans., *Istoricheskie Zapiski (Shi Tsz'i [Shiji])*, vol. 8 (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 2002), and an additional list of translations on p. 357, n. 1. For the possibility that the biography of Jing Ke was authored not by Sima Qian but by his father, Tan, see Derk Bodde, *Statesman, Patriot and General in Ancient China* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1940), pp. 41–42. For a brief discussion of the *Shiji* biography, see David McCraw, “Background for the ‘Biography of Ching K'o,’” in *Chinese Social Relationships: The Ideal vs. the Real* (Honolulu: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1988), pp. 21–32.

to withstand Qin militarily, he set his mind on assassinating the Qin ruler, in a hope that this would cause internal turmoil in Qin and delay the annexation of the rest of the Warring States. After securing Jing Ke's agreement, the prince lavished plentiful favors on his retainer, appointing him to a high ministerial position and delivering him rarities, chariots, women, and "anything he wished." This ability both to esteem worthies and befriend a lowly market drunkard like Jing Ke is surely the most laudable feature of prince Dan in the *Shiji* narrative.

Jing Ke knew that approaching a well-protected ruler of Qin would be a challenging task, and his plan to attain his goal was to deliver the king a very special present. This present was made up of two things: the head of a fugitive Qin general, Fan Yuqi 樊於期, and a map of the Dukang 督亢 region of Yan, a token of submission. Delighted, the king would allow Jing Ke to present his gifts personally, and the latter would then seize the dagger hidden in the map, and stab the king. Fan Yuqi agreed to contribute his head to the plotters, hoping thereby to take revenge for the destruction of his family by the king of Qin. Having obtained his needs, Jing Ke still hesitated to go to Qin, awaiting his friend, who was supposed to assist him. However, after being urged by prince Dan to act immediately, he decided to depart before completing the necessary preparations. Jing Ke's departure from Yan became one of the most famous scenes in Chinese literature, and therefore deserves full citation:

The prince and all his retainers knew of the plan, and all of them went to see [Jing Ke] off, wearing white [mourning] clothes. When they arrived at the Yi river, they performed the sacrifice and selected the route. Gao Jianli struck up the zither, and Jing Ke accompanied him, singing in a [mournful] *bianzhi* pitch. Tears streamed from the eyes of all the men present. Jing Ke then advanced and sang the song:

風蕭蕭兮	<i>Xiao xiao</i> cries the wind
易水寒	Yi waters are cold;
壯士一去兮	Brave men, once gone,
不復還	Never come back!

Shifting to a [martial] *yu* pitch, he became greatly inspired; and the eyes of all the men flashed with anger, and their hair bristled beneath the caps. Jing Ke then mounted the carriage and set off, never looking back again.⁵

⁵ *Shiji* 86, p. 2534; I modify Burton Watson's translation (*Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 3: *Qin Dynasty* [Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993], p. 174). For the

This scene, full of pathos, was followed by an anticlimax. At Qin, matters did not go as smoothly as had been expected. First, Jing Ke's companion, Qin Wuyang 秦舞陽, became fear-stricken and abandoned the operation, leaving Jing Ke alone. Then, the king of Qin spotted the dagger hidden within the map before Jing Ke was able to strike. A grotesque scene followed: the king tried to escape, running around the pillar of the throne room and unable to draw his long sword; the courtiers were of no help, as none of them were allowed to carry weapons. The guards were stationed beneath the throne room and were not allowed to enter it without the king's order. Finally, the king managed to draw his sword and wounded Jing Ke, who in despair threw his dagger at the king, striking instead a bronze pillar.⁶ Heavily wounded, Jing Ke was swiftly overpowered by the palace attendants and soon met his death.

Before his prompt execution, Jing Ke claimed that he did not intend to stab the king, but rather to threaten him with the dagger and exert the promise to return the conquered lands to the regional lords. This fanciful plan was patterned after an action attributed to an earlier putative "assassin-retainer," Cao Mo 曹沫 (or Cao Gui 曹劌, fl. 680s–670s BC) from the state of Lu 魯, who reportedly thereby obtained territorial concessions from the powerful lord Huan of Qi (齊桓公, r. 686–643 BC).⁷ If this claim was indeed made, it may well have been Jing Ke's last-minute excuse for his failure; but in retrospect it added an aura of extraordinary chivalry – or, in the eyes of many – extraordinary folly.

The *Shiji* narrative portrays Jing Ke as resolute, willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his master, who recognized his true worth. His master, prince Dan is portrayed in a less laudable mode; yet the narrator still hails Dan's ability to recognize the worthiness of the marketplace drunkard and to elevate him to the highest position in the state hierarchy. The prince and Jing Ke therefore became for many a paradigmatic pair of "a man [who] dies for the sake of the one who recognizes his worth 士爲知己者死."⁸ This laudable aspect of their relationship somewhat compensates for the foolishness of their plot – the folly of which

analysis of musical pitches employed by Jing Ke, see Ho Lu-Ting and Han Kuo-huang, "On Chinese Scales and National Modes," *Asian Music* 14.1 (1982), pp. 132–54, esp. 135–36.

⁶ It is not clear whether or not the pillar was made of bronze or of the *tong* 桐 wood; see discussion by Matthias Hahn, "Would-Be-Assassin Jing Ke – Adaptations through the Times," paper presented at the XVII EACS conference, Lund, August 9, 2008.

⁷ The story of Cao Mo is narrated in *Shiji* 86, pp. 2515–16.

⁸ This phrase is attributed to another assassin-retainer, Yu Rang 豫讓, whose biography was

is duly emphasized in the earlier parts of the narrative, which depict prince Dan's conversations with his skeptical tutor, Ju Wu.

A cynical reader may discern certain ironic dimensions in the *Shiji* narrative that shed a different light on the prince and his retainer. Thus, Dan's perspicacity in recognizing and elevating the worthy is somewhat compromised by his clumsy treatment of Jing Ke's predecessor, Tian Guang, who committed suicide after the prince displayed doubts pertaining to his loyalty, as well as by Dan's repeated doubts about Jing Ke's resoluteness. Even the portrayal of Jing Ke is somewhat ambivalent: his early history of avoiding fierce opponents, as well as his sluggishness prior to the departure to Qin may be interpreted either as manifestations of self-restraint and skillful planning, or as mere meekness. Moreover, his swordsmanship appears to be less brilliant than it should have been – as is evident from his failure to kill the fleeing king of Qin during their encounter, and as is emphasized in one of the posthumous remarks by his erstwhile acquaintance. This peculiar blend of subtle irony and overtly sympathetic portrayal of Jing Ke, especially in the touching scene of his departure from the state of Yan towards certain death, adds unusual depth to the *Shiji* narrative.

Sima Qian's biography of Jing Ke was not the first account of this affair; its author even explicitly rejected more fanciful narratives, such as the stories about Heavenly omens in support of prince Dan, or stories of Jing Ke's wounding the king of Qin. An account in the "Yan ce" 燕策 section of *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 closely parallels that of *Shiji*, although it is difficult to assess whether it is an earlier version or a derivative of the *Shiji* narrative. A story of Jing Ke's departure from Yan is also briefly narrated in *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (compiled ca. 140 BC), which is dated slightly earlier than *Shiji*, while other Jing Ke-related anecdotes are attested to in the references to the now lost Han works.⁹ The abundance of these anecdotes testifies to the popularity of Jing Ke since the early-Han period.

Aside from *Shiji* and *Zhanguo ce*, Jing Ke's story is told in greater detail in an anonymous *Yan Danzi* (燕丹子, *Master Dan of Yan*), the earliest example of Chinese *xiaoshuo* 小說 prose. In marked distinction from

incorporated into the same chapter of *Shiji* (cited from He Jianzhang 何建章, comp., *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991], "Zhao ce" 趙策 1, j. 18.4, p. 617).

⁹ For the *Zhanguo ce* version, see sect. "Yan ce 3," j. 31.5, pp. 1190–95; for the possibility that it was reproduced from *Shiji*, see Fang Bao 方苞 (1668–1749), "Du zi shi" 讀子史, in *Wang Xi ji* 望溪集 (SKQS edn.) 2, pp. 21–23; Hahn, "Would-Be-Assassin," suggests that the *Zhanguo ce* version is anterior to the *Shiji*. For the other version, see *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, Liu Wendian 劉文典, comp., Feng Yi 馮逸 and Qiao Hua 喬華, colls. (Beijing:

the *Shiji* and other sources, this narrative extols prince Dan at the expense of Jing Ke; specifically, it lauds the prince's generous hospitality in treating his "guest." Dan gives Jing Ke golden ingots to throw at frogs in the pool; feeds him with the liver of a thoroughbred, and – in a most gruesome episode – delivers him severed hands of a female musician, after Jing Ke showed admiration of her hands but not of her body. Moreover, the intemperate prince, who can spare not a moment to hasten his revenge on the king of Qin, waits patiently for an entire three years without raising the issue, until Jing Ke finally volunteers to undertake the mission. In *Yan Danzi*, Jing Ke himself appears less heroic than in *Shiji*, and his ultimate failure is attributed to his folly: after seizing the king's sleeve and enumerating his crimes at dagger point, he allowed the captive to listen to the zither for the last time. In her song, a female zither player hinted at the escape route for the king, but Jing Ke "did not understand her song, and hence allowed the king to escape."¹⁰ After being wounded by the king, Jing Ke cursed himself, for being allowed to be cheated "by a small boy," further increasing the sense that his heroism did not match the high expectations of prince Dan. This narrative appears to be the least favorable of Jing Ke among all the extant versions of his story; but even its critical tones were insufficient to undermine the appeal of Jing Ke's unwavering courage and loyalty for future generations.

COMMEMORATION

The proliferation of multiple Jing Ke-related anecdotes was a first step in the process of his evolution from a failed assassin into a hero. Soon enough, the narration gave way to adoration. Sima Xiangru, an illustrious early-Han poet, was probably the first to compose a eulogy (*zan* 讚) in Jing Ke's honor – evidently, the first ever in Chinese literary history.¹¹ Possibly, the eulogy was attached to the "Discussion of Jing Ke" ("Jing Ke lun" 荆軻論) in five chapters, which Sima co-authored

Zhonghua shuju, 1997), j. 20, "Tai zu xun" 泰族訓, p. 693; *Shiji* 83, p. 2475. Jing Ke-related stories may have been incorporated into the "Biographies of Zealous *shi*" (*Lieshi zhuan* 烈士傳), a now-lost Han compilation cited in *Shiji* glosses.

¹⁰ This episode is discussed by David C. Schaberg in "Song and the Historical Imagination in Early China," *HJAS* 59. 2 (1999), pp. 305–61; see 329–30.

¹¹ Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522) asserts that eulogies existed already in the time of legendary rulers Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, but also implies that their "reinvention" in the Han began with Sima Xiangru. See *Zengding Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu* 增訂文心彫龍校注, Huang Shulin 黃叔琳 and Li Xiang 李詳, annots., Yang Mingzhao 楊明照, coll. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005) 2.9, "Song zan" 頌讚, p. 109.

with other scholars.¹² If it was written in a poetic form, it may well be considered a precursor of Jing Ke-related “historical lyrics” (*yong shi* 詠詩), which are discussed below.

During the Eastern Han (25–220 AD), commemoration of Jing Ke attained a new dimension. Certain literati displayed admiration of Jing Ke in a visual form, placing the scene of the assassination in the most sacrosanct domestic location – their ancestral tomb or temple. No less than three almost identical depictions of the assassination attempt are present in the famous Wu Liang shrine 武梁祠 (erected after 151 AD, Jiaxiang, Shandong) – the single most thoroughly studied Han ancestral compound. As argued by Wu Hung, each of these scenes dramatizes the moment of the assassination attempt: they depict Jing Ke held by a court attendant, a moment after he threw the dagger at the fleeing king of Qin. The dagger appears to be piercing the bronze pillar – an obviously exaggerated feature, aimed at emphasizing Jing Ke’s prowess – in distinction from the more sober *Shiji* narrative.¹³ This presentation of the Jing Ke story recurs in many other Han reliefs, spread throughout the entire Han realm, from Zhejiang in the southeast to Shaanxi in the northwest, and from Sichuan in the southwest to Shandong in the northeast.¹⁴ The proliferation of uniform depiction of Jing Ke suggests the great popularity of the Jing Ke *topos* and the predominantly sympathetic attitude toward the assassin among the Later Han literati.

Parallel to Jing Ke’s introduction into the realm of visual art, his commemoration attained yet another dimension, of naming places in his honor. This phenomenon is first attested in the “Annotated Classic of the Waterways” (*Shui jing zhu* 水經注), by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 527). In a section that deals with the Yi River 易水, in the vicinity of the ancient Yan capital, Li identified the following locations: an old dwelling of Jing Ke; an old dwelling of the fugitive general Fan Yuqi; and a “Seeing-off-Jing [Ke] Canyon 送荆陘.” With regard to the latter, Li notices:

¹² See Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書, Yan Shigu 顏師古, annot. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997) 30, p. 1741.

¹³ For the analysis of the Wu Liang scenes, see Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1989).

¹⁴ For the summary of all known Han tomb reliefs with Jing Ke motif see Käthe Finsterbusch, *Verzeichnis und Motivindex der Han-Darstellungen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966–2004). I have found in Finsterbusch’s volumes depictions of the assassination attempt by Jing Ke in four Sichuan tombs (Jiading 嘉定, Mahao 麻浩, Hechuan 合川 and Wangjiaping 王家坪), two in Shandong (Balimiao 八里廟 and Yinan 沂南 in addition to the Wu Liang shrine); and one each in Shaanxi (Suide 綏德 county), Henan (Tanghe 唐河 county), and Zhejiang (Haining county 海寧縣). For peculiarities of the representations of Jing Ke in the Yinan tomb, see Lydia Thompson, “Confucian Paragon or Popular Deity? Legendary Heroes in a Late-Eastern Han Tomb,” *AM* 3d ser. 12.2 (1999), pp. 1–38, esp. 17–18.

The elders say: here [prince] Dan of Yan gave a farewell banquet to Jing Ke; hence the name. Yet too many generations have passed already, and the matter is not clear. The names inherited from old traditions can neither be analyzed from their content nor commented upon; I just hope to expand the tradition to be heard by posterity.¹⁵

Li Daoyuan's comment testifies to the existence of local oral traditions connected with Jing Ke. Naturally, these traditions flourished in Hebei, near the old Yan capital, where the locals may have been proud of their ancient compatriot. Aside from sheer pride, some might have thought to profit from the widespread popularity of Jing Ke, establishing a kind of "commemoration industry" dedicated to him. Eventually, a town was named after him (presumably the location of his erstwhile lodging identified by Li Daoyuan); then a mountain in the same vicinity, and finally a pagoda built on the mountain.¹⁶ Even more interesting was the proliferation of Jing Ke's putative tombs. While obviously the king of Qin did not grant a proper burial for the man who attempted to kill him, this did not prevent Jing Ke fans from "locating" his tombs in Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, and Shaanxi, neatly spreading them throughout northern China. The tombs were accompanied by appropriate shrines, and at least in one case a stele was erected and an epitaph written to "General Jing 荆將軍."¹⁷ Particularly interesting are Jing Ke-related sites in Henan, which may have appeared only in the Northern Song 北宋 period (960–1127), when the Yi River sites were out of reach for most Chinese, being controlled by the rival Liao 遼 dynasty (916–1125). Yue Shi 樂史 (930–1007) specifically mentions the high popularity of the "Temple of General Jing" in Ru'nan 汝南 county, suggesting that it be-

¹⁵ *Shui jing zhu shu* 水經注疏, Li Daoyuan 酈道元, annot., Yang Shoujing 楊守敬 and Xiong Huizhen 熊會貞, subcomm., Duan Xizhong 段熙仲 and Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛, colls. (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji chubanshe, 1999) 11, pp. 1035–36.

¹⁶ According to Zhang Qingli 張清立, "Jing Ke ta" 荆軻塔, *Hebei shenji* 河北審計 2 (2000), p. 44, the pagoda was first established under the Liao 遼 dynasty (916–1125), at the place where Jing Ke's robe was supposedly buried.

¹⁷ I have identified Jing Ke "tombs" at the following locations: in Henan, in the vicinity of Kaifeng (see Yue Shi 樂史 [930–1007], comp., *Taiping Huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (SKQS edn.) 1, pp. 6–7; and 11, pp. 6–7); in Lucheng county 潞城縣 in eastern Shanxi, close to Hebei border (see Jueluo Shilin 覺羅石麟, *Shanxi tongzhi* 山西通志 [1735; SKQS edn.] 172, p. 45); in Shaanxi in Heyang county 郃陽縣, Lantian county 藍田縣 and Tongzhou prefecture 同州 (Liu Yuyi 劉於義, *Shaanxi tongzhi* 陝西通志 [1735; SKQS edn.] 28, p. 71; and 71, p. 41). For Hebei commemorative sites, including Jing Ke Mountain and Jing Ke City, see *Da Qing yitong zhi* 大清一統志 (SKQS edn.) 30, pp. 4–5. For Jing Ke's epitaph, see a gloss by Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611–1671) in *Lun Heng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, Huang Hui 黃輝, comp. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1995) 6.3, sect. "Long xu" 龍虛, p. 283. Fang notices that the epitaph was most probably compiled by an insufficiently educated person, since the author invented Jing Ke's cognomen (zi 字) by mistakenly borrowing a name of a Chu 楚 (Jing 荆) general.

came an alternative location to which Jing Ke-related commemorative activities were relocated.¹⁸ All this indicates a continuous adoration of Jing Ke and probably the emergence of a kind of Jing Ke-related ancient “tourist industry” with relevant sites conveniently scattered throughout northern China.¹⁹

Yet important as it is, the “material” commemoration of Jing Ke pales in comparison with his poetical immortalization. Indeed, among those who dedicated their poems to the assassin, we find some of the most illustrious Chinese literati, with many others briefly alluding to Jing Ke in their works. To avoid overstressing the present article, I shall confine my discussion to five major personalities who wrote commemorative poems about Jing Ke, selecting authors of different background and from different periods, including both admirers of Jing Ke and his critics.

The first of Jing Ke admirers to be discussed here is Tao Qian 陶潛 (cognomen Yuanming 淵明; 365–427), arguably the most famous poet of the Eastern Jin 東晉 and Southern Dynasties 南朝 era (318–589). Tao, who witnessed the demise of Jin and the ascent of the Liu-Song 劉宋 dynasty (420–479) led by the unscrupulous Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422), was appalled at the political corruption and opportunism of his time and spent most of his adult life in a self-imposed retirement. Around 420, when Liu Yu completed his usurpation, Tao Qian wrote a series of historical poems (*yong shi* 詠詩), in which he expressed his feelings through historical allusions. The poem dedicated to Jing Ke is particularly noteworthy. Tao Qian was not the first to choose Jing Ke’s topic for a historical poem – he was preceded by Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (d. 212) and Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 253–ca. 307); but Tao’s empathy with Jing Ke evidently exceeded that of his predecessors.²⁰ Tao’s poem, which in turn became extraordinarily influential, enticing numerous poetical responses, deserves a full translation:

[Prince] Dan of Yan was good at raising *shi*,
He aspired to revenge on powerful Ying (i.e., Qin),
He gathered the best men in a hundred,

¹⁸ *Taiping Huanyu ji* 11, pp. 6–7.

¹⁹ The existence of this “tourist industry” is attested in a poem by the Ming scholar Li Minbiao 黎民表 (1515–1581), who visited “Jing Ke’s dwelling 荊軻宅,” a full eighteen centuries after Jing’s death! (See his *Yaoshi shanren gao* 瑤石山人稿 [SKQS edn.] 7, p. 5.)

²⁰ For the analyses of this poem and its predecessors, see Lev Z. Eidlin, *Tao Yuan‘min i ego stikhotvoreniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967), pp. 411–15; James R. Hightower, *The Poetry of T‘ao Ch‘ien* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1970), pp. 224–29; Charles Yim-tze Kwong, *Tao Qian and the Chinese Poetic Tradition: The Quest for Cultural Identity* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1994), pp. 83–86.

- And by the year's end he attained Jing Qing (i.e., Jing Ke).
- 5 "A superior man dies for the one who profoundly understand
him"²¹
- Carrying the sword, [Jing Ke] left the Yan capital.
"The white horses neigh on the broad road,
Being greatly inspired, they send me off."
Manly hair bristles the tall cap,
- 10 Valiant spirit charges the long cap-strings;
He is given the farewell feast on the banks of the Yi River,
From four sides the many heroes are arrayed.
[Gao] Jianli strikes a mournful zither,
Song Yi sings a shrill song.
- 15 *Xiao xiao* – the sad wing recedes,
Swelling, swelling, the cold waves rise.
With the *shang* pitch, tears flow,
With *yu* played, the valorous *shi* are roused.
In his heart he knows that he goes for no return,
- 20 Yet he will have a name for posterity.
Mounting a chariot, he has no time to look back,
Canopy flying, he sweeps to the Qin court.
Fiercely, he traverses myriad *li*,
Winding his way, he passes a thousand cities.
- 25 [Yet] the map opened, the matter had been discovered,
A powerful ruler is stark terrified.
Alas, his [Jing Ke's] swordsmanship was deficient,
And the miraculous achievement was therefore not attained.
Yet although this man has perished,
- 30 His sentiments will linger throughout the ages.²²

The poem displays Tao Qian's unwavering empathy toward Jing Ke. This empathy is manifest first and foremost in the author's selection of Jing Ke-related events: in marked distinction from the *Shiji* and *Prince Dan of Yan* narratives, Tao Qian dedicated slightly more than half his lines (16 out of 30) to Jing Ke's heroic departure from the Yan capital. This emphasis on a single most favorable episode in Jing Ke's life creates a strong pro-Jing Ke bias, which is further strengthened by

²¹ This is an allusion to Yu Rang's words, which became a quintessential definition of the retainers' ethics; see n. 8, above.

²² *Tao Yuanming ji* 陶淵明集, Lu Qinli 逯欽立, coll. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), j. 4, p. 131. In translation, I borrowed from Kwong (see n. 20, above).

the author's conspicuous omission of any reference to the folly of the political plans of Jing Ke and prince Dan. Moreover, the author emphasizes his solidarity with Jing Ke by adopting the latter's voice in lines 7–8. Throughout the poem he repeatedly stresses Jing Ke's manliness and valor. And while he admits that Jing Ke's swordsmanship was deficient, he immediately restores the assassin's prestige by mentioning that "his sentiments will linger throughout the ages."

Why did Tao Qian chose to unequivocally endorse Jing Ke? Is it possible that, living under somewhat similar conditions of political fragmentation and collapse of legitimate *loci* of authority, the poet felt that the dagger-based strategy may be worth emulation? I did not find any evidence to strengthen this conclusion, though. More likely, Tao Qian simply reflected – with greater poetical sophistication – widespread feelings of admiration for Jing Ke's courage and chivalry, as observable in many other poems that preceded and postdated his work. Indeed, most authors of Jing Ke-related poems dating from the middle to late imperial period shared Tao Qian's admiration of Jing Ke; but there were also some dissenting voices. The sharpest criticism of Jing Ke was voiced by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), an important political thinker of the second half of the Tang 唐 (618–907) who was associated with the Confucian revivalism of the time. Liu's "Poem about Jing Ke" ("Yong Jing Ke" 詠荆軻) is similar in length to that of Tao Qian, but differs in almost every other aspect. It begins with the following lines:

Yan and Qin could not coexist,
And the Heir-Apparent worried about this.
For one thousand in gold, he presented a short plan,
[Giving] Jing Qing [=Ke] a dagger, to speed him on his way.²³

From the third line on, the author outlines his skepticism about Jing Ke's mission. He calls the dagger, for which prince Yan reportedly paid one thousand gold ingots, "a short plan 短計," thereby indicating the initial short-sightedness of the assassination plot. He then depicts at length the prince's mistrust of Jing Ke and their discord, suggesting that Jing Ke "with an angry glance left the Yan capital 怒目辭燕都."²⁴ The author selects those parts of the *Shiji* narrative that shade unfavorable light on the hero. The dramatic departure on the banks of the Yi River is treated in just two lines (of the entire 32), while most of the remainder of the poem depicts Qin's awful retaliation for the failed plot. Liu Zongyuan mentions how king Xi 喜 of Yan (r. 254–222 BC)

²³ Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, *Liu Hedong quanji* 劉河東全集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1994) 43, p. 496.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

executed his son, prince Dan, in a vain attempt to avert Qin's wrath, and also tells of the extermination of Jing Ke's relatives to the seventh degree by the vengeful king of Qin. He then concludes:

The Emperor of Qin was by nature deceitful and forceful,
His affairs differed from those of Lord Huan [of Qi],
How was then it possible to emulate Master Cao [Mo]?
This is called – gallant but stupid!²⁵

This cruel remark refers to the most fanciful aspect of Jing Ke's plan – his supposed desire to emulate Cao Mo and to convince, at dagger point, the king of Qin to give up the conquered lands. This plan, as Liu rightfully notices, was courageous but ultimately stupid. This phrase perfectly summarizes Liu Zongyuan's perception of Jing Ke.

Liu Zongyuan is the only example I have found of an author who wrote a poem dedicated to Jing Ke explicitly to deride him. While in terms of content Liu's criticism of Jing Ke reflected a widespread literati opinion, as I demonstrate next, his decision to embed the criticism in poetical form was unprecedented. Perhaps this decision reflected his uneasiness with Jing Ke's poetical popularity. Numerous earlier poets, from Ruan Yu and Zuo Si to Tao Qian, moreover, Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581), Luo Binwang 駱賓王 (d. 684), Li Bai 李白 (701–762), Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698–757), and Liu's contemporary, Jia Dao 賈島 (788–843), to mention only a few, warmly endorsed Jing Ke, and this may have angered Liu Zongyuan.²⁶ His assault may therefore have been yet another dimension of Liu's common predilection for attacking what he considered to be widespread erroneous views, as he did with regard to a variety of political, historical, and cosmological issues.²⁷ If this analysis is correct, then Liu's poem may serve as an indirect testimony to Jing Ke's ongoing popularity among the educated elite.

Another major intellectual who became engaged in polemics with Tao Qian over Jing Ke was Su Shi 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo 蘇東坡; 1036–1101),

²⁵ Ibid., p. 497.

²⁶ For Yu Xin, see William T. Graham, Jr. and James R. Hightower, "Yu Hsin's 'Songs of Sorrow,'" *HJAS* 43.1 (1983), pp. 5–55, esp. p. 28 and pp. 52–53. Luo Binwang and Jia Dao's poems are cited by Mary Chan, "Chinese Heroic Poems and European Epic," *Comparative Literature* 26.2 (1974), pp. 142–68, esp. 145–46. For Li Bai, see his "Zeng youren san shou" 贈友人三首, in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, j. 171.10, cited from <http://shuku.mofcom.gov.cn/book/htmfile/23/s3928_3.htm>; for Wang Changling, see his "Za xing" 雜興 in *Quan Tang shi* j. 141.2, cited from <<http://big5.mofcom.gov.cn/gate/big5/shuku.mofcom.gov.cn/book/htmfile/23/s3898.htm>>.

²⁷ For Liu Zongyuan's intellectual activities, see Chen Jo-shui, *Liu Tsung-yüan and Intellectual Change in Tang China, 773–819* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1992). Among many examples of his affront to established views, one can mention Liu's assault on a respected historical treatise, the *Guoyu* 國語, and his provocative treatise "On Heaven" ("Tian shuo" 天說); see *Liu Hedong quanji* 44–45, pp. 494–526; 16, pp. 194–99.

the great literary genius of the Northern Song period. At a certain stage of his troublesome career, Su Shi developed a strong self-identification with Tao Qian, with whom he then became engaged in a lengthy dialogue over centuries. Su Shi composed “matching 和” poems to every piece in Tao Qian’s corpus; among them, “Matching a Poem on Jing Ke” figures prominently.²⁸

The composition of Su Shi’s poem differs markedly from Tao Qian’s. Most of the poem does not deal with Jing Ke but rather with Qin – a cruel state, which, nonetheless, enjoyed momentary support of Heaven, and hence was temporarily invincible. The problem of prince Dan, asserts Su Shi, was his intemperate desire to seek revenge against Qin immediately; hence he rejected careful planning and behaved like “a crazy fellow 狂生.” Su Shi compares prince Dan unfavorably with the Chu 楚-based rebels who eventually toppled Qin in 209–207 BC: these rebels claimed that “even if only three households” remain in Chu, it would be their task to destroy Qin, while Yan still possessed “dozens of walled cities.”²⁹ This rejection of assassination as an imprudent mode of political action resonates well with historical views of Su Shi, for whom plotters like Jing Ke were incomparably inferior to true political strategists.³⁰

Su Shi’s criticism of Jing Ke resembles that of Liu Zongyuan, but his conclusion surprisingly goes back to Tao Qian’s pro-Jing Ke pathos:

至今天下人	Until now, the people in All under Heaven,
愍燕欲其成	Are sorry for [the state of] Yan and would like it to succeed.
廢書一太息	I am putting the book aside and sigh deeply,
可見千古情	One can see the sentiments lingering throughout the ages. ³¹

²⁸ For Su Shi’s “obsession” with Tao Qian and his diachronic dialogue with Tao, see Ronald C. Egan, *Word, Image and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 39 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University and the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1994), pp. 229–37.

²⁹ For the Chu saying that “even if only three households remain in Chu, it will be Chu that destroys Qin 楚雖三戶，亡秦必楚也,” see *Shiji* 7, p. 300.

³⁰ In his discussion “On the Marquis of Liu” (留侯論), dedicated to the early Han statesman, Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 186 BC), whose career began with an attempt to assassinate the First Emperor, Su Shi writes: “In spite of his peerless talent, Zifang [=Zhang Liang] did not develop the strategies of a Yi Yin or Tai Gong [who orchestrated overthrow of the Xia and Shang dynasties, respectively]. Instead he followed the plots of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng [another famous assassin]. The result was that he escaped death only by the stroke of luck.” 子房以蓋世之才，不爲伊尹、太公之謀，而特出於荆軻、聶政之計，以僥倖於不死 (cited from Egan, *Word, Image and Deed*, p. 23; see also Egan’s discussion of Su Shi’s historical views).

³¹ Su Shi 蘇軾, “He Tao Shi wu shi qi shou” 和陶氏五十七首, in *Dongpo quanji* 東坡全集 (SKQS edn.) 33, p. 2.

In his customarily brilliant fashion, Su Shi distinguishes between two levels of appraisal of Jing Ke: the rational level and the emotional. Rationally, the plot to assassinate the king of Qin was a miserable failure, and its performers do not deserve laudations. Nonetheless, one cannot help but admire Jing Ke's integrity and commitment, which are hinted at through the reference to Tao Qian and to the *Shiji* narrative. This explains why the people of the world continue to regret the demise of the state of Yan: it is this emotional attachment to Jing Ke that continues to linger throughout the ages.

Liu Zongyuan and Su Shi represent the critical side of the spectrum of Jing Ke-related poems; but the majority of the poems, which I have found in the electronic *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 and in other sources, are much more favorable. An example of an author deeply inspired by Jing Ke is Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608–1647), a late-Ming martyr. Chen, who displayed the spirit of defiance early in his life when he denounced a protégé of the all-powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), made a rapid career in the last years of the Ming dynasty, and later became a hero of anti-Qing resistance in Jiangnan 江南. In 1640, as Qing armies wreaked havoc in the north, Chen Zilong was positioned in Zhejiang, from where he haplessly observed the demise of the imperial armies. These events prompted him to compose “Crossing the Yi River” (“Du Yi shui” 渡易水):

Last night, the [sharp] Bing dagger cried in the box,
The mournful songs of Yan and Zhao are most indignant.
The Yi river roars, the clouds and grass are azure;
Alas, there is no place to see off Jing Qing!³²

For Chen Zilong, Jing Ke was a source of inspiration and probably a model for emulation. Being in dire straits, the state should have employed radical survival stratagems, including the dispatching of assassins, if necessary. Chen Zilong's approval of Jing Ke's act is evident in another of his Jing Ke-related poems, “Poem of the Yi River” (“Yi shui ge” 易水歌) in which he expresses his grief not just for Jing Ke's failure but even for the resultant unification of China – the fullest political support of Jing Ke's goals I have been able to locate anywhere!³³ In “Crossing the Yi River” Chen Zilong laments the lack of people like those who see off Jing Ke, among whom he might have liked to see himself. A

³² Chen Zilong, “Du Yi shui” 渡易水, in *Chen Zilong shi ji* 陳子龍詩集, coll. Shi Zhecun 施鰲存 and Ma Zuxi 馬祖熙 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), p. 586. See also <<http://www.chinarok.com/trad/history/1/15/15f/15fo7/15fo704.htm>>.

³³ “Alas, the six directions returned to a single house 可憐六合歸一家”; Chen Zilong, “Yi shui ge” 易水歌, *ibid.*, j. 10, p. 303

few years after the poem was composed, Chen indeed emulated Jing's suicidal strategy, leading two doomed mutinies against the Qing, and committing suicide while in custody.³⁴ For an intemperate loyalist and Confucian "fundamentalist" (as dubbed by Frederick Wakeman) such as Chen Zilong, calls for prudence and strategic thinking from the persons such as Liu Zongyuan or Su Shi, would have fallen on deaf ears.

That frustrated literati would turn to Jing Ke for inspiration is quite understandable; but that a poem hailing the assassin would be composed by a reigning emperor is truly remarkable. In 1746, the thirty-five-year-old Qianlong emperor paid a visit to the so-called Jing Ke Mountain in Hebei, and composed a poem to convey his feelings. The poem displays a much warmer attitude toward Jing Ke than that expressed by Liu Zongyuan and even by Su Shi. The emperor mentions that "southern Yan from antiquity had plenty of righteous knights 燕南自古多義俠";³⁵ and after narrating the failure of the assassination attempt, he concludes:

秋風九月拂征鞍	Autumn wind, in the ninth month, flicks the battle saddle,
想像蕭蕭易水寒	I imagine how it called " <i>xiao xiao</i> ," when the Yi River was cold,
當時壯士不復返	Brave men of that time had gone; and would never come back.
安得若斧留山巔	How would I be able to leave [my poem] engraved on the mountain top?
徒令千秋弔古人	I would just like to mourn for a thousand years the men of antiquity,
恨不終從鞠武言	I regret that to the end [Prince Dan] was unable to follow Ju Wu's words. ³⁶

The last line is the only one which makes the emperor's poem closer to that of Su Shi than to those of most other Jing Ke admirers: it hints, albeit mildly, at the political recklessness of the plotters. Nonetheless, this line does not diminish the overall favorable attitude toward Jing Ke displayed throughout the poem. Not only does the emperor denominate the assassin "a righteous knight 義俠," but he also dedicates three

³⁴ Many details about Chen Zilong's career are scattered throughout Frederick Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U. California P., 1985). See also Chang, Kang-i Sun, *The Late Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung: Crises of Love and Loyalty* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1991). Chang (pp. 105-6) mentions that Chen Zilong's friend, Hou Fangyu 侯方域 (1618-1655), had explicitly compared Chen to Jing Ke, after Chen's heroic death.

³⁵ The Qianlong Emperor, *Yuzhi shi ji* 御製詩集 (SKQS edn.) 35, p. 20.

³⁶ Ibid.

out of eighteen lines to the scene of Jing Ke's departure from Yan – a scene which, as we noticed above, was most frequently employed by the writers sympathetic with Jing Ke. The question is, why does the emperor display such a remarkably favorable attitude toward a political outcast? Was it youthful playfulness which caused the ruler to touch on a politically sensitive topic, or perhaps a calculated attempt to improve the emperor's image in the eyes of the Chinese literati? Whatever the answer may be, the poem indicates that the popularity of Jing Ke remained intact throughout the imperial millennia, and that it was not confined to dissenting literati but was shared by a broad stratum of the educated elite and beyond.

Among various commemorative activities for Jing Ke, those associated most directly with the literati – e.g. poetical commemoration – are, generally, quite equivocal. While pictorial representations of Jing Ke in the Han tombs and proliferation of Jing Ke-related “commemorative sites” throughout the North China Plain reflect admiration of the assassin, among the poets the opinions differed. Those who adored Jing Ke usually focused on his spirit of sacrifice, particularly on the scene of his departure from Yan, paying less attention to the political aspects of his actions. In contrast, his critics, particularly Liu Zongyuan and to a certain extent Su Shi, emphasized the political foolishness behind Jing Ke's plot. Both emphases are not necessarily contradictory but rather complementary: as Su Shi's poem indicates, literati could distinguish between a political negation of Jing Ke's actions and an adoration of his spirit. Interestingly, none of Jing Ke's admirers justified his actions in terms of political legitimacy. As we shall see below, this omission is not incidental: in sharp distinction from modern filmmakers, traditional Chinese literati remained overwhelmingly critical of the idea of tyrannicide. To clarify this, we turn to the genre of political essays, which reflects with greater clarity the negative attitudes toward the political assassination.

CRITICISM

Critical comments relating to Jing Ke appeared almost simultaneously with the first signs of his adoration, and among Jing Ke's critics we find staunch opponents of the Qin rule. Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BC), whose essay “On the Faults of Qin” (“Guo Qin lun” 過秦論) became the *locus classicus* for early-Han anti-Qin thinking, did not hail Jing Ke as a “freedom fighter.” To the contrary, in his comments about the dangers posed by powerful regional lords, Jia Yi referred to the plot de-

vised by prince Dan and Jing Ke as an example of clandestine activity that endangers the legitimate ruler. For an astute political analyst and a staunch supporter of political unification like Jia Yi, Jing Ke symbolized forces of political disintegration, and his actions were utterly illegitimate.³⁷

Jia Yi was concerned with political subversion in the Jing Ke affair, while for others the hired assassin represented flawed morality. One of the clearest condemnations appears in *Fa yan* (法言, *Model Words*) by Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BC–18 AD), a book that comprises short imaginary dialogues in the *Lunyu* 論語 style. One of these exchanges discusses the nature of courage:

Someone asked about courage. [I] answered: “Ke.”
“Which Ke?”

“Ke is Meng Ke [Mengzi 孟子, ca. 380–304 BC]. As for Jing Ke, the superior men consider him a criminal.”³⁸

Yang Xiong leaves no doubt: as Jing Ke’s action was morally inappropriate, it cannot be considered courageous – in distinction from the morally driven defiance of the rulers by Mengzi, one of Yang Xiong’s paragons. Elsewhere, he further elaborates:

[Jing Ke,] for the sake of [Prince] Dan, submitted [to the king of Qin Fan] Yuqi’s head and the map of Dukang of Yan, entering the state of Qin [the power of which] he did not assess. He is the most brilliant of assassin-retainers; but how can you call him “righteous”?³⁹

For Yang Xiong, from the point of view of morality and of political appropriateness, Jing Ke does not deserve praise; he may be the best of the assassin-retainers, and his courage may be laudable, but this does not justify his inclusion among the righteous *shi*. Yang does not elaborate further, but evidently he did not consider Qin’s cruelty and aggressiveness as justification for the act of assassination. The destiny of All-under-Heaven should not be decided at dagger point!

This rejection of Jing Ke’s act in terms of political morality is a common thread in most of the essays about Jing Ke. While the poets,

³⁷ For Jia Yi’s mention of Jing Ke, see *Han shu* 48, p. 2263; for more about Jia Yi’s political views, see Charles T. Sanft, “Rule: A Study of Jia Yi’s *Xin shu*,” Ph.D. diss. (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, 2005). For the ideal of political unification in early Chinese thought, see Yuri Pines, “‘The One that Pervades All’ in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: Origins of ‘the Great Unity’ Paradigm,” *TP* 86.4–5 (2000), pp. 280–324.

³⁸ Yang Xiong 楊雄, *Fa yan zhu* 法言注, Han Jing 韓敬, annot. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), j. 11.4 (sect. “Yuan qian” 淵騫), p. 274.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, j. 11.13, p. 283.

with rare exception, emphasized Jing's courage and determination, the essayists focused primarily on the moral and political aspects of his actions. Their judgment of both remained overwhelmingly negative. This is especially vivid in several Song-period essays, which reflect the same mood of critical revision of the historical figures of the past that we have already encountered in Liu Zongyuan's poem from the late-Tang period. This critical reevaluation is exemplified in Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019–1086) monumental *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid the Government* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒). After telling the story of the failed plot and of the resultant elimination of the state of Yan, Sima Guang presents his analysis of prince Dan and Jing Ke:

Your servant, Guang, says: [Prince] Dan of Yan was unable to overcome an anger of a single morning and assaulted the wolf-and-tiger-like Qin. His thinking was shallow, his planning superficial; he induced resentment and hastened the disaster; he caused a sudden cessation of the sacrifices to [the founder of the state of Yan,] Lord Shao [召公, fl. ca. 1040 BC]. Which crime can be greater than that? And yet, some of the discussants consider him worthy – is it not a transgressive judgment?⁴⁰

Sima Guang emphasizes the political folly of the intemperate prince. He then briefly explores alternative courses of action, namely strengthening the state of Yan through moral and efficient rule, which could have deterred the Qin assault, and summarizes:

Dan cast away these [ways of action] and wanted to use the ten-thousand-chariots state to resolve the anger of an ordinary fellow. He performed the criminally murderous plot, but his achievements collapsed, his body was persecuted, and his altars of soil and grain devastated. Is it not tragic?⁴¹

In this passage Sima Guang touches upon the legitimacy of Dan's plot, and considers it “criminally murderous 盜賊之謀.” This brief statement demonstrates that Sima, like most other writers, did not consider Qin's evilness as a justification for an assassination attempt. Interestingly, however, Sima Guang does not focus on the political illegitimacy of the assassination and does not designate Dan's action as “rebellious.” This omission is not incidental: a sensitive historian, Sima Guang was aware that prince Dan was not a subordinate of the king of Qin, and his plot did not violate the norms of political hierarchy *strictu sensu*. Nonethe-

⁴⁰ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒, Hu Sanxing 胡三省, annot. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992) 7, p. 231.

⁴¹ Ibid.

less, Sima Guang's uneasiness with the dagger-based morality is clear, and it is even more evident in his subsequent assault on Jing Ke:

Jing Ke cared only for his private [interest] of being fed and nourished; he did not consider his kin to the seventh degree; he wanted to use an eight-*chi* long dagger to strengthen Yan and weaken Qin. Is it not stupid? Master Yang [Xiong] said, in discussing him: "... the superior men consider him a criminal" – a good saying!⁴²

This passage seems to absolve Jing Ke from the right to the empathy that he enjoyed among the literati. Sima Guang dismisses any discussion of Jing's courage and determination, and even his willingness to die for the master is interpreted as selfishness, which led to the extermination of Jing's kin. Foolishness and criminality are the features of Jing Ke, just as they are the features of his master, prince Dan. This is the verdict of Sima Guang, arguably the single most influential political writer in China's imperial history.

Sima Guang's views were echoed by his younger contemporary, Su Shi's brother, Su Che 蘇轍 (1039–1112). Su Che derided the entire culture of assassination, and devoted a special discussion to the issue of "assassin-retainers." He begins unequivocally: "When Zhou declined and ritual and propriety became obscure, petty men exerted themselves to obstruct their superiors, praising each other as 'worthies.'"⁴³ This opening sentence diminishes any possibility of sympathy toward the assassin-retainers, who are: first, associated with the age of decline of ritual and propriety; second, pejoratively named "petty men"; and, third, accused of obstructing superiors – three negative features that diminish any respect for their putative courage. Su Che then discusses each of the famous assassin-retainers of the Warring States, treating most of them extremely negatively. On Jing Ke, he remarks:

As for Jing Ke trying to assassinate the First Emperor: although the emperor due to his violence lost the empathy of All-under-Heaven and all those who heard [of the assassination] rejoiced, still to take advantage criminally of the ruler's lack of vigilance cannot be turned into a constant method.⁴⁴

Su Che was less historically sensitive than Sima Guang, considering the First Emperor as Jing Ke's supreme ruler. He acknowledges the Emperor's evilness, but emphasizes that nonetheless an assassina-

⁴² Ibid., p. 232.

⁴³ Su Che 蘇轍, "Ci ke lun" 刺客論, in Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507–1560), comp., *Bai bian* 稗編 (SKQS edn.) 99, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

tion of the ruler is a criminal act. Similarly, most other essayists did not consider Qin's alleged immorality as a justification for the assassination. The only exception to this rule is a statement by Ye Shi 葉適 (1150–1223), a leading political thinker of the Southern Song dynasty 南宋 (1127–1279). Ye Shi stated:

Among discussants of Jing Ke, many consider it strange that Yang Xiong said: “Ke is Meng Ke. As for Jing Ke, the superior men consider him a criminal.” Incidentally, both Ke have the same name; hence he advanced Meng to dismiss Jing. Xiong is really a petty fellow! Mengzi said: “A cruel and criminal person is called ‘an ordinary fellow.’ I heard that a fellow Zhou[xin] was punished, but did not hear of murdering a ruler.”⁴⁵ Mengzi strongly argued that if the position of the Warring State rulers is compared to their righteousness, then they are nasty fellows who commit crimes against benevolence and righteousness. As for the First Emperor, he was a huge swine and a lengthy snake, which incessantly swallowed All-under-Heaven; the men of All-under-Heaven had to jointly rise and punish him. Although [Jing] Ke did not succeed in his enterprise, his will was magnificent.⁴⁶

Of the analyses that I surveyed, Ye Shi's is the only one that considers Jing Ke's assassination as politically appropriate. He recalls Mengzi's bold assertion that an immoral ruler lacks the right to rule, and employs it to justify the anti-Qin plot. Remarkably, Ye Shi does not consider the assassination as an inter-state rather than an intra-state affair; to the contrary, he refers to the king of Qin by his soon-to-be-assumed title, the “First Emperor,” assuming his universal leadership. Therefore, Ye Shi presents a rare case in traditional China of invoking the principle of tyrannicide to justify Jing Ke.

Ye Shi's position remains an enigma. This rather conservative statesman, who sought ways through which to restore northern lands lost in previous generations to the Jin 金 dynasty (1115–1234), was not a political radical. Neither was he a desperate man of letters of Chen Zilong's kind, for whom assassinating the leader of a powerful enemy may have appealed as a desperate attempt to avert inevitable military disaster.⁴⁷ Possibly, his surprising justification of the political assassi-

⁴⁵ See *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注, Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, annot. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), j. 2.8 (sect. “Liang Hui Wang xia” 梁惠王下), p. 42. Zhouxin 紂辛 was a vicious last ruler of the Shang dynasty, who was reportedly executed by the victorious king Wu of Zhou 周武王 circa 1046 BC.

⁴⁶ Ye Shi 葉適, *Xuexi ji yan* 學習記言 (SKQS edn.), j. 18, p. 13.

⁴⁷ For Ye Shi's ideology, see Winston Wan Lo, *The Life and Thought of Yeh Shih* (Gainesville: U.P. Florida, 1974).

nation reflects the relatively tolerant political atmosphere of the Song court; in the later periods, high officials never voiced similar sentiments, which may have easily been interpreted as subversive.

Summarizing the political essays that deal with Jing Ke, we may conclude that the prevalent opinion of the writers was negative: Jing Ke's act lacked both prudence and political justification, and his sacrifice was wasted. Unlike the poets, who emphasized the dramatic moment of Jing Ke's departure from Yan, creating spiritual affinity with the hero, the essayists analyzed Jing Ke and prince Dan's plot in a broader political context. Their conclusions, except for those of Ye Shi, were unequivocal: however laudable Jing Ke's determination was, his goal was illegitimate and his course of action should not be emulated. The hero of the poets turned into villain of the essayists.

TO SCARE THE EMPEROR: JING KE AND THE ANTI-HIERARCHICAL MINDSET

The discussion above presented an ostensibly paradoxical attitude toward Jing Ke. On the one hand, the assassin was highly popular among the elite and non-elite members, as evidenced by the widespread "commemoration industry" and by the predominantly positive treatment of his deed in poetry. On the other hand, few, if any, justified his actions on moral or political grounds, and even fewer accepted its prudence. Su Shi's analysis, presented above, may then well summarize the literati views of Jing Ke as an odd combination of the admiration of his spirit and derision of his folly.

While for many modern observers – as I shall demonstrate in the Epilogue – such a blend of negation and adoration is almost inconceivable, this was not the case in traditional China. In sharp distinction to an erroneous view of Chinese historiography as simplistically dividing the protagonists into heroes and villains, many Chinese historians excelled at distinguishing between sympathetic treatment of historical personalities and political negation of their deeds. Tragic heroes such as Xiang Yu 項羽 (d. 202 BC), the failed contender for power against the founder of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195 BC), abound in historical writings, especially in the earlier layers of Chinese historiography. Such heroes were admired despite their misdeeds or occasional folly, due to their moral integrity, fearlessness, and commitment to their goals. In this regard, the ultimate failure of Jing Ke may have actually contributed to the positive aspects of his image. Had he succeeded in his mission, the authors may have focused more on the politi-

cal implications of his actions; but it was the noble fiasco that allowed his admirers to concentrate on his powerful spirit instead. Tao Qian's final lines "Yet although this man has perished / His sentiments will linger throughout the ages" capture this notion. It was the perishability of Jing Ke, as exemplified by the pathos of his departure from Yan, which was cherished the most.

This line of analysis is not novel, of course, as it was proposed by many eminent scholars in the past.⁴⁸ Another explanation for the adoration of Jing Ke and his fellow assassin-retainers is that they exemplify the utmost loyalty – a highly esteemed virtue in the Warring States period and thereafter.⁴⁹ Convincing as it is, this line of explanation of Jing Ke's popularity looks to me somewhat flawed. Of all the assassin-retainers whose biographies were collected by Sima Qian, Jing Ke appears as less fitting to the paradigmatic picture of "a man [who] dies for the sake of the one who recognizes his worth."⁵⁰ As mentioned above, his relations with prince Dan were marred by suspicion and misunderstandings, which make this pair an unlikely exemplar of truly amicable ruler-minister ties. Deeper sources of Jing Ke's popularity should be sought after elsewhere.

I believe that aside from the *topoi* of chivalry and loyalty there is another, subtler reason for which Jing Ke was adored – and this reason is specifically related to his story. After all, there were several gallant assassins in China's turbulent past, but none of them could rival Jing Ke's popularity. Jing Ke's advantage over the fellow "knights-errant" and "assassin-retainers" is directly related to the identity of Jing Ke's victim. By having attempted to assassinate the emperor-to-be, Jing Ke made a statement about the nature of social hierarchy, and I believe that this implicit statement earned him even more popularity than his pathos on the banks of the Yi River.

The First Emperor of Qin was not an ordinary ruler, but, arguably, one of the most powerful individuals in Chinese, and perhaps even in all human history. He reshaped the life of China to a degree unparalleled until Mao Zedong's ascendancy in the twentieth century. Even those generations of Chinese who knew nothing of the magnificent terracotta army of the First Emperor, and never visited the towering hill

⁴⁸ See, e.g., James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight Errant* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967); Chan, "Chinese Heroic Poems."

⁴⁹ For the concept of loyalty during the Warring States period see Yuri Pines, "Friends or Foes: Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China," *MS* 50 (2002), pp. 35–74, esp. 57–59 for the retainers' loyalty.

⁵⁰ See n. 8, above.

under which the emperor's megalomaniacal tomb is located, realized that he was the most awesome ruler, one who promulgated the semi-divine vision of the monarch that henceforth became part and parcel of China's political culture.⁵¹ And it was precisely this monarch who barely escaped the assassin's dagger, running pathetically around the column of his audience hall, and being unable to utilize all his might to repel a man of humble origins armed with nothing but a dagger!

The contrast between the omnipotent king of Qin and the assassin could not be more evident. Jing Ke, a marketplace drunkard who made friends with a dog butcher and a zither-player, was in an incomparably lower position than his victim; but for those few fateful seconds in the audience hall he made the powerful king flee for his life. This deed represented a momentary demise of the norms of social hierarchy, and equation – even if ephemeral – of the ruler and the subject. As such it responded to the deep aspirations of the lower segment of the *shi* 士 stratum, the “plain-clothed 布衣 *shi*.” Jing Ke's act became emblematic of the power of the human will to transcend social boundaries. It was this memory that lingered “throughout the ages.”

The failed assassination attempt upon the king of Qin occurred at a crucial historical junction: the final years of the Warring States period and the eve of the new, imperial, era. The Warring States period probably witnessed the highest rates of social mobility in China's history prior to the Communist revolution. The coexistence of competing courts and powerful individual patrons, who vied for “worthy” *shi* and assembled talented individuals from the entire Chinese world, along with the widespread use of promotions for those who obtained military merit and high tax yields – all these created multiple career avenues for men with high aspirations. The story of Jing Ke being “discovered” and promoted by prince Dan reflects a common (even if idealized) practice of the time, as testified in multiple historical anecdotes. *Shi*, commoners, and, occasionally even slaves, could find themselves rising quickly to a position of power provided they were gifted and lucky enough to find an appropriate patron. This situation contributed to the extraordinary pride of the “plain-clothed” *shi*, who considered themselves “teachers and friends” of the rulers rather than mere subjects.⁵²

⁵¹ For the role of the First Emperor in shaping the image of Chinese monarchs for the centuries to come, see Liu Zehua 劉澤華, *Zhongguo de wangquan zhuyi* 中國的王權主義 (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2000), pp. 128–37; Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Period* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2009), pp. 107–10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 115–35, for social mobility during the Warring States period and its relation to *shi* pride.

High-profile political assassinations of the Warring States period, which culminated with the Jing Ke affair, were, to a certain extent, a byproduct of contemporaneous peculiar social conditions. The very fact that a humble assassin could approach his high-ranking victim reflected the relative permeability of hierarchic lines, at least in comparison with the imperial age. In a more rigidly organized, strictly hierarchical and bureaucratically efficient Chinese empire, the assassination of the ruler was not just morally unacceptable, but also technically extremely difficult and politically ineffective. Hence, throughout the two imperial millennia emperors were killed exclusively by the members of their own entourage, close kin or plotting ministers – but not by outsiders such as Jing Ke.⁵³ The latter's attempt remained unparalleled in China's long history, and for this reason was even more cherished by future generations.

Shortly after the Jing Ke affair, Chinese sociopolitical structure underwent the profound shift from the mobility and flexibility of the Warring States to the rigidity and marked hierarchy of imperial rule. For many members of the elite this situation must have been frustrating, as their hopes for illustrious careers gradually faded. For those frustrated literati Jing Ke became a symbol of the bygone age, possibly even an emblem of their suppressed aspirations. Not incidentally, therefore, the Han period witnessed a proliferation of the anecdotes that further dramatized the assassin's encounter with the king. The stories of Jing Ke wounding the king of Qin, of his dagger piercing the bronze pillar of the audience hall, and of Jing Ke holding the trembling monarch and listing his heinous crimes – all may be considered as a kind of “compensation” for Jing Ke's ultimate failure.⁵⁴ All these versions, which as we have mentioned were also given pictorial representation in Later Han tombs, lionized the assassin and emphasized the king's plight, thereby further diminishing the hierarchical distinction between a *shi* and a ruler.

⁵³ The only ruler who reportedly faced real threat of assassination in the imperial history was Jing Ke's purported victim, the First Emperor of Qin. In later periods, supposed plotters had been caught in the vicinity of the Forbidden City or even directly within its precincts, and in most cases the trespassers were identified as would-be assassins; but it is unlikely that this was indeed the case (see e.g. Ray Huang, 1587: *A Year of No Significance* [New Haven: Yale U.P., 1981], pp. 36–37).

⁵⁴ These narratives are referred to – disapprovingly – in *Shiji* 86, p. 2538 and in Wang Chong 王充 (ca. 27–97 AD), *Lun heng* 論衡, j. 8, “Ru zeng” 儒增, pp. 372–73; see also *Yan Danzi*. For a much later attempt to twist history and make Jing Ke succeed in protecting the lands of Yan, see the drama by Ye Xianzu 葉憲祖 (1566–1641), *Yi shui han* 易水寒, discussed by Matthias Hahn, “Yi Shui Han – Teilübersetzung ein mingzeitlichen Theaterstückes unter Berücksichtigung der Überlieferungsgeschichte des Stoffes,” M.A. thesis (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, 2006).

The appeal of Jing Ke's affair is evident not only in the above anecdotes and stone carvings, but also in closely related anecdotes that circulated during the Han. One of these, which was ultimately incorporated in *Zhanguo ce*, is particularly revealing. It tells of the king of Qin (again, king Zheng) who demands from a ruler of the tiny principality of Anling 安陵 to yield his territory in exchange for a much larger one from Qin. The ruler of Anling refuses, and dispatches his retainer Tang Ju 唐且 to appease the king. At the audience, Tang Ju boldly repeats that his master refuses to exchange lands, being devoted to his former rulers the recently extinguished Wei 魏 dynasty. Then the following exchange ensues:

The king of Qin was furious, and said to Tang Ju: "Have you heard of the rage of a Son of Heaven?"

Tang Ju replied: "I have not."

The king of Qin said: "When the Son of Heaven is enraged, bodies are piled in millions, the blood flows for a thousand *li*."

Tang Ju said: "Have you, the Great King, heard of the rage of a plain-clothed [*shi*]?"

The king of Qin said: "When a plain-clothed is enraged, he throws away his cap, runs barefooted, and knocks his head on the ground – and this is all."

Tang Ju said: "This is the rage of an ordinary fellow, not of a *shi*. When Zhuan Zhu assassinated king Liao [of Wu 吳], a comet reached the moon; when Nie Zheng assassinated Han Kui [the prime-minister of Han 韓], a white rainbow pierced the Sun; when Yao Li assassinated [Prince] Qingji [of Wu], green hawks flew into the throne hall. These three Masters all were plain-clothed *shi*. They preserved their rage, not allowing it to outburst, thereby attaining ominous vapors to descend from Heaven. Together with me, it makes the four. When the *shi* is enraged, only two bodies are piled, the blood flows for five steps, and the whole world wears mourning. Now is this moment." He seized his sword and rose up.

Greatly irritated, the king of Qin changed his color. He stretched himself up on his knees, and said, in an apologetic manner: "Please sit down, my lord; how have we arrived at this? I understand [your message]. That Han and Wei were eliminated and by contrast Anling with its fifty *li* squared survived is only because of you."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *Zhanguo ce* 25.27, "Wei ce" 魏策 4, pp. 959–60.

This anecdote has no value whatsoever for the actual history of the late Warring States period. As has been proved long ago, the abundance of factual mistakes clearly indicates that it was an outright invention of a Han person.⁵⁶ This invented story sounds like an alternative version of the Jing Ke story: an imaginative scenario of what could have happened had Jing Ke succeeded in scaring the king. For the present discussion, the most important part of the anecdote is Tang Ju's tirade in favor of the plain-clothed *shi*. The will of these humble fellows touches Heaven and causes it to cast down omens; and it is their rage, which makes even the most powerful of men – the Son of Heaven – tremble with fear. The notion of momentary equality between a plain-clothed *shi* and the Emperor is developed here to the utmost.

If my analysis is correct, then the admiration towards Jing Ke was twofold: first, as an example of a tragic hero, whose failure highlights his nobility of spirit; and, second, as a champion of the humble and the insignificant “plain-clothed” *shi*, the one who was able to transcend hierarchical barriers and to equal himself for a brief moment with the emperor. However, this subtle anti-hierarchical mindset should not be considered “heterodoxy,” as recently asserted by Liu Kwang-Ching and Richard Shek.⁵⁷ Rather, hierarchical and anti-hierarchical ideas complemented each other in Chinese political culture. The society was to be hierarchically organized at any given moment; but this hierarchy was presumably not fixed, but rather open to advancement or demotion based on individual merit. Jing Ke, due to his supposedly superb martial abilities and unwavering determination, succeeded in ascending, for a short while, to the top of the sociopolitical ladder, equaling himself to the Ruler of Men; but as his abilities proved to be inadequate, he reverted to his former position at the bottom of the ladder. Thus, the Jing Ke story does not question the desirability of hierarchically-organized society as such; it just suggests that additional avenues for individual advancement should exist. Similar ideas are implicitly presented in Tang Ju's anecdote, cited above.

I believe that the same line of analysis that I have applied to Jing Ke is applicable to a large variety of later stories relating to “traveling knights” (*you xia* 遊俠) and other members of the “gallant fraternity.” Heroes of this genre – which culminated in the immortal *Water Margins* (*Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳) – were admired, much like Jing

⁵⁶ See He Jianzhang's *Zhanguo ce* glosses for further details.

⁵⁷ See Liu Kwang-Ching and Richard Shek, “Introduction,” in idem, eds., *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2004), pp. 1–28.

Ke, for both their righteous spirit and their radical challenge of social hierarchical norms. Sure enough, this challenge forever remained limited: even in the gallant fraternity there was an obvious hierarchy of ranks, which at times could cause significant tension. However, it was the rebellious undercurrent, epitomized by Li Kui's 李逵 call to "slaughter our way into the Eastern Capital and seize the friggin throne 殺去東京, 奪了鳥位," which may have aroused the sympathy of many readers.⁵⁸

The proposed line of analysis also explains the ambivalence of the literati toward Jing Ke and *mutatis mutandis* toward the heroes from the "gallant fraternity." The simultaneous adoration and censure may reflect a dual social position of Chinese intellectuals. While on one hand, most of the literati definitely belonged to the ruling elite and sought to uphold the social hierarchy, on the other hand, individual literati were frequently frustrated, believing that they deserved a much higher position than the one they actually occupied. As the elite members, they disapproved of the subversive messages of the assassins and other "traveling knights"; as frustrated individuals, many of them felt sympathetic toward these violators of the established norms. And it was in the poetry, the traditional vehicle of expressing one's aspirations 志, that numerous literati found it appropriate to endorse Jing Ke.

EPILOGUE: TERRORIST OR FREEDOM FIGHTER? JING KE IN MODERNITY

The perennial split between the widespread adoration of Jing Ke and the similarly broad condemnation of his actions came to an abrupt end at the beginning of the twentieth century. The collapse of the imperial political structure and the advent of republicanism transformed Jing Ke's assassination attempt from a heinous crime into an acceptable, even laudable deed. This radical political reinterpretation is evident in "The Precious Blade Poem" ("Bao dao ge" 寶刀歌) by the early-Republican revolutionary martyr, Qiu Jin. Her poem contains the following passage:

⁵⁸ See Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 and Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 [attributed to], *Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳 [Rongyu tang 容與堂 ed.], collated by Ling Geng 凌賡, Heng He 恆鶴 and Diao Ning 刁寧 (rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), j. 41, p. 606; translation cited from Sydney Shapiro, trans., *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1993) 41, p. 662.

不觀荆軻作秦客	Have you not seen Jing Ke coming as an assassin-retainer to Qin?
圖窮匕首見盈尺	The map completely unrolled, the foot-long dagger had been exposed,
殿前一擊雖不中	Although his attempt missed [the emperor] in front of the audience hall,
已奪專制魔王魄	He still succeeded to scare to death the Devil King of tyranny. ⁵⁹

Qiu Jin, whose fascination with swordsmanship made her particularly fond of Jing Ke and of the “knight-errant” tradition in general,⁶⁰ dismissed those features of the Jing Ke narrative on which most of the earlier writers had focused. Rather than lamenting Jing Ke’s departure from prince Dan on the banks of the Yi River and extolling his spirit, Qiu Jin stressed his *deed*, focusing on the dramatic moment in the audience hall. It is for his ability to frighten the emperor that Jing Ke is hailed. By designating the emperor “the Devil King of tyranny,” Qiu Jin legitimated the assassination attempt and transformed Jing Ke from a faithful retainer into a freedom fighter. The political aspect of the assassination, which was for two millennia Jing Ke’s major liability, suddenly became the true reason for the adoration of the assassin.

Qiu Jin’s poem inaugurated the reassessment of Jing Ke in the Republican period (1912–1949). The assassin became the embodiment of all the features that the educated Chinese missed in their compatriots: patriotism, hatred of tyranny and martial spirit. Swiftly, Jing Ke ascended the pantheon of national heroes, as expressed in the programmatic poem by one of the most eminent Republican poets, Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899–1946), “I Am Chinese” (“Wo shi Zhongguo ren” 我是中國人, 1925):

我是中國人, 我是支那人	I am Chinese, I am a Chinaman,
我的心里有堯舜的心	In my heart there are the hearts of Yao and Shun,
我的血是荆軻聶政的血	My blood is the blood of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng,
我是神農黃帝的遺孽	I am a descendant of Shen Nong and the Yellow Emperor. ⁶¹

⁵⁹ Cited from < <http://www.huanghuagang.org/issue16/big5/08.htm> >.

⁶⁰ See Hu Ying, “Writing Qiu Jin’s Life: Wu Zhiying and Her Family Learning,” *Late Imperial China* 25.2 (2004), pp. 119–60; see pp. 131–35.

⁶¹ *Wen Yiduo shi ji* 聞一多詩集 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1984), p. 284. Nie Zheng is another assassin-retainer whose biography was reproduced in *Shiji*.

Jing Ke appears here as a national emblem, the proud counterpart of the two paragon emperors, Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, and the two founding fathers of the Chinese nation, Shen Nong 神農 and the Yellow Emperor 皇帝. Such a pairing would have been unthinkable in the imperial period, when even the greatest admirers of Jing Ke could not possibly ignore his problematic background. Yet in a newly evolving China, a new sort of national hero was needed, and Jing Ke's persona answered perfectly to this demand.

The ascendancy of the Communist Party in 1949 did not benefit Jing Ke. Newly promulgated heroes of the past were leaders of peasant rebellions, such as Jing Ke's younger contemporary Chen She 陳涉 (d. 208 BC), whose insurrection eventually toppled the powerful Qin. Jing Ke's methods of "individual terror" were as unacceptable to the Communists as they were to Su Shi nine centuries earlier; and the lack of prudence in Jing Ke's action was again highlighted. However, even if not a great hero, Jing Ke was still presented in a mostly favorable light as a courageous individual with a true "revolutionary" spirit.⁶² It was only in the later part of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that his reputation suffered a significant setback. In the aftermath of the Lin Biao 林彪 affair (1971), Mao Zedong's fear of assassins and the parallel exaltation of the First Emperor created an exceptionally unfavorable atmosphere for Jing Ke. In a programmatic anti-Jing Ke article, Huang Tao 黃濤, a leading supporter of the Gang of Four and a member of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, explained to the readers of *Renmin ribao* that Jing Ke was not "a gallant hero" but rather a desperado who served a "separatist regime" of prince Dan. Insofar as Dan sought "to obstruct the progress of history," Jing Ke was just a "wretched buffoon who tried to oppose the flow of history."⁶³ Shortly thereafter, He Zhongwen 何鍾文 published a book named *The King of Qin Punishes Jing Ke*. Here the failed assassin appears as a perfidious plotter, who is easily outplayed by the "historically progressive" king of Qin and is mercilessly executed. The story ends with a poem:

歷史永遠向前進	History progresses forever,
螳臂豈能擋車輪	How can a praying mantis block the carriage?

⁶² See He Chenggang 何成剛, "Jing Ke ci Qin' zhi lishi jiedu ji qita" 荆軻刺秦之歷史解讀及其他; <http://lszx.zhedu.net.cn/teacher/wjj/new_page_29.htm>.

⁶³ Huang Tao 黃濤, "The Dagger at the End of the Map Could Not Save the Counterrevolutionary Party," *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 25.12.1973 (I am grateful to Anthony Barbieri-Low for sending me this article; I use his translation).

in a lengthy article, the important writer Tao Shilong 陶世龍 dismissed the fascination with Jing Ke as misguided and emphasized the “terrorist” aspects of his activities; while Professor Yi Yangsheng 易陽生 from the International Studies Department of the Capital Normal University rhetorically asked what would happen should a person like Jing Ke possess a nuclear bomb.⁶⁶ While these voices are a minority, their impact cannot be neglected. More than two millennia after his death, Jing Ke remains a potentially explosive topic.

I shall end my survey of contemporary views of Jing Ke with a brief reference to two of the most important Jing Ke-related productions, namely the feature films “The Emperor and the Assassin” by Chen Kaige and “Hero” by Zhang Yimou. It is not my intention here to offer a detailed analysis of both movies; this had been done elsewhere.⁶⁷ While I do believe that many Western critics tend to over-emphasize the political messages of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou at the expense of their purely commercial interests, there is no doubt that politics were inevitably involved in their treatment of the most famous assassination attempt in Chinese history. Both filmmakers had to respond to the predominantly positive views of Jing Ke among their audience without extolling political assassination, and without lending support to Jing Ke’s (and his master’s) goal of preventing, or at least delaying the unification of “China.” Each of the directors chose a highly distinctive way of dealing with this challenging task, and each of them, especially, regrettably, the first, flattened the narrative, creating much weaker movies – insofar as the plot is concerned – than they usually do.

Chen Kaige chose to side with Jing Ke. To justify the assassination attempt, he opted to blacken the First Emperor to the extent that is reminiscent of the Han period’s anti-Qin invectives. Albeit recognizing historical desirability and the inevitability of the imperial unification, Chen depicted its actual implementation under king Zheng in the most gloomy manner, emphasizing its huge cost in human lives, and adding even a somewhat bizarre scene of massive suicide of the children of the state of Zhao 趙 – an obviously ahistorical element in the narrative. The

⁶⁶ See Tao Shilong 陶世龍, “We Must Clearly See That There is Terrorism with Chinese Characteristics” 需要認清具有中國特色的恐怖主義, <<http://www.66wen.com/o3fx/zhengzhi/xingzheng/20061007/44299.html>>; Yi Yangsheng 易陽生, “Jing Ke of the Next Generations Will Be Able to Annihilate Qin – Reexamining Terrorism” 荆軻再世可滅秦, 重新審視恐怖主義; <<http://www.redfox88.com/u412.htm>>.

⁶⁷ See e.g., Maurizio Marinelli, “Heroism/Terrorism: Empire Building in Contemporary Chinese Films,” *Journal of Asian Cinema* 16.2 (2005) and his references.

director furthermore stressed the negative features of the First Emperor (who deteriorates throughout the film, turning into a monster), including even a story of the emperor becoming a father-killer. This presentation may be easily interpreted as justification for the assassination attempt – yet a highly moral assassin, Jing Ke, who is full of remorse for his past life as a hired killer, fails to fulfill the task. The film falls short from hailing the assassination attempt, but the viewer may well join the chorus of those ancient literati who, in Su Shi’s words, “were sorry for [the state of] Yan and would like it to succeed.”

In contrast to his colleague and friend-competitor, Zhang Yimou interpreted the story in a much more pro-Qin way. Yet his unequivocal confirmation of the desirability of the Qin-led unification led him to recast the assassination story in an entirely novel way. The leading assassin (a “Nameless” – that is, a person whose background is dissociated from Jing Ke’s story) comes to the conclusion that, politically speaking, he is wrong while the king is right – and he forsakes the assassination attempt, willing to receive the death penalty and to thereby facilitate the unification of the realm. While reinterpreting the story in a somewhat anti-Chen Kaige way and adding a certain depth to it, Zhang Yimou shared his colleague’s basic premise: one cannot endorse the assassin unless he or she approves of the assassin’s political goals. Either the emperor was a monster, and hence the assassination attempt was justified; or the emperor was a savior, so that the morally upright assassin cancelled the assassination attempt altogether!

Without entering further discussion of what appears to me as somewhat flawed movies by two excellent directors, I would like to conclude by pointing to the problem reflected in these movies. It seems that after a century of the repeated employment of the “good-bad” dichotomy, many Chinese intellectuals are no longer able to accept the moral ambiguity of the past.⁶⁸ While Sima Qian, Su Shi, and many other imperial

⁶⁸ Other modern Jing Ke-related productions roughly follow the Chen Kaige/Zhang Yimou dichotomy; see, e.g., a novel by the Taiwan-based author, Gao Yang 高陽 (b. 1926), *Jing Ke* (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004); or a drama by Zhang Ping 張平, *Jing Ke and the King of Qin* (*Jing Ke yu Qin wang* 荆軻與秦王), *Dangdai xiju* 當代戲劇 2 (2005), pp. 40–55. Sometimes, to avoid needless controversies, the authors simply eliminate any reference to political aspects of Jing Ke’s assassination, turning him into just another “knight-errant,” as clearly evident in the *manga* comic *Jing Ke* (Hua Sheng 花盛, illustrator, and Liu Yu 劉瑜, narrator; see *Manhua Zhonghua yingxiong* 漫畫中華英雄 [Beijing: Xiandai chubanshe, 2006]). The authors hail Jing Ke’s “high morality” but do not explain how this morality is manifested in a failed assassination attempt. Among the few authors who call for a reassessment of the contradictory nature of Jing Ke figure, I would mention He Chenggang 何成剛 (see n. 55, above), yet he does not fully take into account the complexity of Jing Ke. Of course, my focus on the good/bad division in modern Chinese cultural production should not be read as a generalization.

literati could sympathize with a person emotionally while negating his deed politically, this privilege of ambivalence apparently does not exist in contemporary China, which has only recently – and only partly – liberated itself from the quasi-Manichean ideology of communism and anti-communism. As in many other cases, modern authors prefer to avoid harsh moral dilemmas, inevitably flattening the complexity of the past.⁶⁹ In retrospect, it seems that the analytical depth of traditional Chinese culture remains heretofore unmatched.

⁶⁹ This flattening is obvious not only in the Jing Ke story but in the treatment of many historical personages in movies and television series. Most noteworthy are the authors of the *Shui hu zhuan* television series, who chose to present a sympathetic portrait of a grand murderer, Li Kui 李逵, skillfully eliminating all of his crimes – such as the murder of an innocent child – that would alienate a modern audience. The discrepancy between the complex message of the original novel and the television series could not be more evident! For Li Kui's depiction in the original *Shui hu zhuan*, see Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), pp. 323–28.