

# The Dislocation of Identity and Responsibility of Jing-Ke, Prince Dan and Qin-Wuyang in Jing-Ke's Assassinating the King of Qin

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**Abstract.** The evaluation of historical figures often changes with the times. Contemporary students often wonder whether Jing-Ke's "valuing justice over life" is only "the dead foolish loyalty, irrelevant morality"? Returning to the interpretation of the content and combining with the analysis of historical materials, it could be found that Prince Dan and Qin-Wuyang had noble status but failed to take responsibility, while Jing-Ke devoted himself to the tragedy of assassinating the King of Qin with a commoner identity. Thus, his "righteousness" was the justice of the country and its "courage" was the spiritual strength supported by belief. In the process of teaching, divergent thinking should base on the paragraph itself, and we should carefully explore the content, retrospective logic, and explore the hidden meaning.

**Keywords:** Jing-Ke; Prince Dan; Valuing justice; Courage and insight; Dislocation of identity.

## 1. Introduction

*Jing-Ke's Assassinating the King of Qin* is one of the key contents of Chinese literature class in middle schools (including ordinary high schools and vocational high schools). The article is excerpted from *Intrigues of the Warring States: Policy in Kingdom Yan*, which is both literary and historic, and difficult to interpret. With the change and development of the times, especially the concept of legal system, more and more middle school students ask themselves questions after class or in class: how to understand the image of Jing-Ke? What qualities does he have that we should learn from in modern society?

Traditionally, the textbook of *Jing-Ke's assassinating the King of Qin* is mainly interpreted around "small countries resist great powers" and "Jing-Ke stresses righteousness over life and has great courage and knowledge". However, from the perspective of historical development, there is no distinction between justice and injustice in the struggle between Kingdom Yan and Qin in the so-called "Spring and Autumn Period without righteousness war". From the perspective of historical materialism, the unity of Qin is historical necessity, not accidental transfer of "assassinating Qin"; and from Jing's own point of view, its "valuing justice over life" has the characteristics of personal fealty to Prince Dan ("the King of Qin must be captured in order to repay the kindness of Prince Dan"). Students who have received the education of historical materialism and legal system will easily opposing Jing-Ke's assassination of Qin Dynasty and others when they examine the gains and losses of their predecessors from the perspective of future generations. People's Education Press textbooks are also keenly aware of this, so they encourage students to discuss in after-class thinking questions. (1) Does "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin" show the real justice? (2) Can "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin" change the history of Qin's unification of the other six kingdoms?

Open discussion helps to understand the incident of "assassinating Qin Dynasty". Through discussion, students tend to reach such a consensus: from the perspective of Yan Kingdom, the assassination is reasonable and has certain justice, but from the law of historical development, the assassination is neither conducive to preventing Qin from unifying the other six kingdoms, nor to create a better history.

At the same time, the students' evaluation of Jing-Ke's personal qualities has reached a deadlock. There is a growing trend of opinion: Jing-Ke's "valuing justice over life" is an assassin's "professional code of ethics", which is irrelevant to morality, so his courage has become a blind solitary courage.

This opinion will lead to a negative interpretation, that is, "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin" is objectively a tragedy, but Jing-Ke's personal qualities can hardly be learned by others.

Returning to the textbook itself and combining with the historical literature background, we should see that Jing-Ke is not a "paragon", but the negative interpretation of his righteousness and courage is more like one-sided, which is a misreading of the text logic and subtext. In the process of in-class teaching, divergent thinking is not a rambling talk, but must be supported by evidence and reasons. The author summed up two easily neglected points in the text and historical background, and then discussed Jing-Ke's personal qualities.

## 2. Understanding the Assassination: Jing-Ke's Emphasis on "Justice over Life" is Indeed National Righteousness

From the text point of view, Jing-Ke believes that the task of assassinating the King of Qin is to solve the imminent threat of extermination for the Yan kingdom, not to solve personal grievances for a certain person. In the original text, there are two references to Jing's understanding: the first one is when Jing persuaded General Fan to commit suicide in private, and said to him, "Your revenge avenged, and the humiliation of Yan kingdom also washed away." The so-called "revenge" refers to General Fan's private grievances, while the subject of "humiliation" is "Yan kingdom", not "Prince Dan", which shows that Jing-Ke understands the task of assassinating the King of Qin is not to settle a private grievance for Prince Dan, but to defend a country. Jing-Ke's understanding of the task of assassinating the King of Qin is also reflected in his anger when he was urged to set out by Prince Dan, who said, "I'm not hesitating, I'm just making a plan to come back alive!" In his heart, he despised the courage of ordinary assassins to kill people and fight for their lives. He wanted to make "assassinating Qin" changing the relations between countries.

Other historical documents also support this view. The historical materials of Jing-Ke's assassinating the King of Qin mainly come from *the Records of History* of Emperor Wu in the Western Han Dynasty and *the Warring States Policy* in the Chengdi Period of the Western Han Dynasty. Some scholars find that *the Warring States Policy* completed later than *the Records of History*, and the logic of the article was unclear. They point out that the description of "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin" in *the Warring States Policy* originates from *the Records of History*, which is the first-hand information of the known and complete record of "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin". In *the Records of Assassins in the Records of History*, it is recorded that Prince Dan won Jing-Ke's loyalty for the reason of his family and country's distress ("Yan and Qin are not alike", "Qin is greedy, its desire is insufficient"). Therefore, "Jing-Ke assassinating the King of Qin" is a task that an assassin had to perform in order to serve the monarch on the surface. In fact, it is a sacrifice made for the justice of a country and its heart to "fight for the weak against the powerful". Such spiritual qualities are worthy of admiration and study by future generations.

However, as the behind-the-scenes manipulator of the "assassinating Qin" operation, Prince Dan played a rather disgraceful role. For Prince Dan, the assassination of the King of Qin is not only reasonable in the sense of the state, but also settles his private grievances. Prince Dan concealed his "private grievances" to a considerable extent with state discourse and won the trust of Jing-Ke and others. However, in the content, there was a leak of his inner thoughts: when Jing-Ke proposed that General Fan should commit suicide in due time, Prince Dan responded, "Dan can't bear to hurt General Fan because of my selfishness, could you please change another plan?" This sentence on the surface reflects Prince Dan's kindness, even indecision, but in fact the focus is on the words "my selfishness". Jing-Ke and others understand that "the humiliation of Yan kingdom" is described by Prince Dan as "my selfishness", which showed that the prince confused state affairs and private affairs. Moreover, he finally drove others to pay their lives for his own selfishness. In *the Records of Assassins in the Records of History*, there is a more detailed description of the "private grievances" between Prince Dan and the King of Qin (at that time, the King of Qin is still named Prince Zheng): Prince Zheng was born in the kingdom of Zhao, and he got along well with Prince Dan when they were young. After Prince Zheng became the King of Qin, Prince Dan was sent to Qin, and the King

of Qin did not treat the Prince well. Therefore, their friendship ended and Prince Dan escaped back to his own kingdom. It also proves the complex motive behind Prince Dan's plot to assassinate the King of Qin. Obviously, Jing-Ke has his limitations. He believed in Prince Dan's statement about the peril of his country and lacked the ability to penetrate the political conspiracy and the dark side of human nature. However, he still has personality charm.

To sum up, in the assassination of the King of Qin, Jing-Ke and Prince Dan appeared obvious identity mismatch. Jing-Ke took it as his duty to uphold justice and save the nation from peril, and embarked on the journey without hesitation; while Prince Dan hid his selfishness and played tricks on the doorman, which eventually led to the complete tragedy of action failure and the death of the country. Literary works and historical facts have produced a strong irony here: Jing-Ke, as commoner of the kingdom, interprets his responsibility from the perspective of the state; while Prince Dan, as the leading authority and noble of Yan Kingdom, selfishly plays with conspiracy and in the shadow of national crisis. It seems like an echo of the words in "Cao Kui's Prose Works on Ware": The nobles are short-sighted, and they can't make far-sighted plans.

### **3. Performance in the Assassination: Jing-Ke's Courage and Insight are Worthy of his Name.**

After explaining that the narrow-minded and short-sighted action of assassinating the King of Qin was caused by Prince Dan, not Jing-Ke, the criticism of Jing-Ke's "foolish loyalty and solitary courage" should also be self-evident. However, in the description of Jing-Ke's "courage" in textbooks, a pair of delicate mismatches of identities appeared again: Jing-Ke and Qin-Wuyang.

As a supporting role in the assassination of the King of Qin, Qin-Wuyang has not been paid much attention to it from beginning to end. We can interpret the contents include that he "killed people at the age of twelve, and people dare not look him in the eye." Wuyang looks like a super brave man, but in the court of the Qin Kingdom, "his face distorted because of shock and terror", and ultimately failed to give any help to Jing-Ke. Oppositely, Qin-Wuyang triggered the Qin people alert, caused counterproductive effect.

Why does the seemingly vigorous, young Qin-Wuyang, do nothing in the court of Qin Kingdom? In the Historical Records of Huns, a train of thought is given: Qin-Wuyang is an absolute aristocrat of Yan King. His grandfather is Qin-Kai, a famous general who presided over the construction of Yan Great Wall and defended the Huns. Thus, because of the noble's privilege, he dares to kill people without any punishment. Nowadays, historical data cannot prove what kind of responsibility Qin-Wuyang is responsible for killing people, but at least it can be inferred that the consequences of killing people in Qin-Wuyang as an aristocrat are different from that of Jing-Ke as a commoner. Therefore, Qin-Wuyang is not a knight, but more similar to the Han Dynasty's "Wuling Youth" and "Yulin Soldiers", whose bravery is supported by government power. In the end, this kind of impure courage failed to withstand the test before the real crisis, which became another reason for the failure of the assassination.

Compared with Qin-Wuyang, Jing-Ke was of lower birth, but he played a more important role in the assassination, which also reflected his bravery. This kind of Jing-Ke-like courage relies not on power and blood, but on firm spiritual support: saving the Yan Kingdom from peril and rectifying justice for the upcoming. In the face of the threat of death, a commoner has great wisdom and courage, but those aristocrats showed their weakness and selfishness - literature and history once again appear delicate identity mismatch, educating the later generations that the real courage is not physical strength, not external support, but from the spiritual level of faith support.

To sum up, the personal qualities of Jing-Ke in Assassinating the King of Qin are worthy of admiration and learning from future generations. In spite of the limitations of history, information acquisition, position, social atmosphere and personal dedication, Jing-Ke did show some blind trust in Prince Dan and lack of strategic design, which led to the tragedy of the assassination. However, if future generations can observe the mismatch of Jing-Ke, Prince Dan and Qin-Wuyang's identities, and understand how a commoner surpasses the limitation of identity, inspires the courage to save the

nation from peril, and devotes itself to the feat of desperation, they will learn the spirit of "humble, but never forget the responsibilities on one's shoulder for his nation" and the courage of "going against the prevailing trend". The students will also learn the respect and praise of ancient historians for those who were ordinary in status and noble in morality.

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