

SHI JI 86: THE BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ASSASSIN-RETAINERS (EXCERPT)

*The Biography of Jing Ke*¹

Some 220 years later there was the affair of Jing Ke in Qin. Jing Ke was a native of Wey, though his family came originally from Qi. The men of Wey referred to him as Master Qing, the men of Yan, as Master Jing. He loved to read books and practise swordsmanship. He expounded his ideas to Lord Yuan of Wey, but Lord Yuan failed to make use of him. Later, Qin attacked Wey, established Dong Province, and moved the collateral kinsmen of Lord Yuan of Wey to Yewang.

Jing Ke once visited the area of Yuci, where he engaged Gai Nie in a discussion on swordsmanship. In the course of the talk, Gai Nie got angry and glared fiercely at Jing Ke, who immediately withdrew. Someone asked Gai Nie if he did not intend to summon Jing Ke back again. "When I was discussing swordsmanship with him a little while ago," said Gai Nie, "we had a difference of opinion and I glared at him. Go and look for him if you like, but I'm quite certain he has gone. He wouldn't dare stay around!" Gai Nie sent a messenger to the house where Jing Ke had been staying, but Jing Ke had already mounted his carriage and left Yuci. When the messenger returned with this report, Gai Nie said, "I knew he would go. I glared at him and frightened him away."

Again, when Jing Ke was visiting the city of Handan, he and a man named Lu Goujian got into a quarrel over a chess game. Lu Goujian grew angry and began to shout, whereupon Jing Ke fled without a word and never came to see Lu Goujian again.

¹The biography of Jing Ke is the last of five biographies that make up *Shi ji* 86, "The Biographies of the Assassin-retainers". The *cike* or "assassin-retainers" are men who undertake an assassination or threat of assassination in order to avenge some wrong done to their lord or to right a political wrong. The account of Jing Ke is the only one of the five biographies that concerns the history of the state of Qin. The whole chapter is translated in my *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 45-67.

In the course of his travels Jing Ke reached the state of Yan, where he became close friends with a dog butcher and a man named Gao Jianli who was good at playing the lute. Jing Ke was fond of wine, and every day he would join the dog butcher and Gao Jianli to drink in the market place of the Yan capital. After the wine had begun to take effect, Gao Jianli would strike up the lute and Jing Ke would join in with a song. In the middle of the crowded market place they would happily amuse themselves, or if their mood changed they would break into tears, exactly as though there were no one else about. But, although Jing Ke spent his time with drunkards, he was a man of depth and learning. Whatever feudal state he travelled to, he always became close friends with the most worthy and influential men. When he went to Yan, Master Tian Guang, a gentleman of Yan who was living in retirement, treated him very kindly, for he realized that he was no ordinary man.

After Jing Ke had been in Yan some time, Prince Dan, the heir apparent of Yan, who had been a hostage in Qin, escaped and returned home. Previously Prince Dan had been a hostage in Zhao. Zheng, the king of Qin, was born in Zhao, and in his youth had been very friendly with Prince Dan; later, when Zheng became king, Prince Dan went as a hostage to the Qin court. But the king of Qin treated him very shabbily until, in anger, he escaped from the state and returned to Yan. After his return, he looked about for someone who would undertake to get back at the king of Qin for him; but because Yan was small and powerless, there was nothing he could do. Meanwhile, Qin day by day dispatched more troops east of the mountains, attacking Qi, Chu, Hann, Wei, and Zhao and gradually eating away at the lands of the other feudal lords, until it became obvious that Yan's turn would be next. The ruler of Yan and his ministers all feared imminent disaster, and Prince Dan, likewise worried over the situation, asked his tutor Ju Wu what could be done.

Ju Wu replied, "Qin's lands fill the world and its might overawes the rulers of Hann, Wei, and Zhao. To the north it occupies the strongholds at Sweet Springs and Valley Mouth, and to the south the fertile fields of the Jing and Wei river valleys; it commands the riches of Ba and Han and the mountain ranges of Long and Shu to the west, and the vital Hangu and Yao passes to the east. Its people are numerous and its soldiers well trained, and it has more weapons and armour than it can use. If it should ever decide to march against us, we could find no safety south of the Great Wall or north of the Yi River.² Angry as you

²The boundaries of the state of Yan.

are at the insults you have suffered, you surely would not want to brush against its bristling scales!"³

"Then what should I do?" said Prince Dan.

"Let me retire and think it over," replied Ju Wu.

Shortly afterwards the Qin general Fan Yuqi, having offended the king of Qin, fled to Yan, where Prince Dan received him and assigned him quarters. Ju Wu admonished the prince, saying, "This will not do! Violent as the king of Qin is, and with the resentment he nurses against Yan because of your escape, it is already enough to make one's heart turn cold. And what will he be like when he hears where General Fan is staying? This is what men call throwing meat in the path of a starving tiger — there will be no help for the misfortune that follows! Even if you had ministers as wise as Guan Zhong and Yan Ying, they could think of no way to save you! I beg you to send General Fan at once to the territory of the Xiongnu barbarians to get him out of the way. Then, after you have negotiated with Hann, Wei, and Zhao to the west, entered into alliance with Qi and Chu on the south, and established friendly relations with the leader of the Xiongnu to the north, we may be able to plan what move to make next."

"The scheme you propose will require a great deal of time," said Prince Dan. "As anxious as I feel at the moment, I am afraid I cannot wait that long! And that is not all. General Fan, having been hounded throughout the world, has come to entrust his fate to me. No matter how much I might be pressed by Qin and its power, I could never bear, when he is in such a pitiful plight, to betray his friendship and abandon him by sending him off to the Xiongnu! This is a matter of life and death to me. I beg you to consider the question once more."

Ju Wu said, "To pursue a dangerous course and hope for safety, to invite disaster while seeking good fortune; with too little planning and too much hatred to disregard a serious threat to the whole nation because of some lately incurred debt of friendship to one man — this is what is known as 'fanning resentment and abetting disaster'! Drop a swan's feather into a burning brazier and puff! — it is all over in an instant. And when Qin, like a ravening hawk, comes to vent its anger, will Yan be able to last any longer? However, there is a certain Master Tian Guang in Yan who is a man of deep wisdom and great daring. He would be a good person to consult."

"I would like you to introduce me to him," said Prince Dan. "Can you arrange it?"

³The deadly scales that protrude from the throat of a dragon.

"With pleasure," said Ju Wu, and went to see Master Tian, informing him that the crown prince wished to consult him on matters of state. "I will be happy to comply," said Master Tian. He went to call on the prince, who came out to greet him, politely led him inside, knelt, and dusted off a mat for him to sit on.

When Tian Guang was settled on his seat and those about them had retired, the prince deferentially moved off his mat and addressed his request to his visitor: "Yan and Qin cannot both stand! I beg you to devote your mind to this problem."

"They say," replied Tian Guang, "that when a thoroughbred horse is in its prime, it can gallop 1,000 *li* in one day; but when it is old and decrepit, the sorriest nag will outdistance it. It appears that you have heard reports of how I was when I was in my prime, but do not realize that my strength is by now wasted and gone. Nevertheless, though I myself would not venture to plan for the safety of the state, I have a friend named Master Jing who could be consulted."

"I would like you to introduce me to him," said Prince Dan. "Is it possible?"

"With pleasure," said Tian Guang and, rising from his mat, he hurried from the room. The prince escorted him as far as the gate and there warned him, "What we have been discussing is a matter of vital concern to the nation. Please do not let word of it leak out!"

Tian Guang lowered his gaze to the ground and replied with a laugh, "I understand."

Then, stooped with age, he made his way to the house of Master Jing. "Everyone in Yan knows that we are good friends," he said. "The crown prince, having heard reports of me when I was in my prime and unaware that by now my powers have failed, has told me that Yan and Qin cannot continue to exist side by side and begged me to devote my mind to the problem. Rather than refuse his request, I took the liberty of mentioning your name. May I ask you to go call on him at his palace?"

"I will be glad to comply," said Jing Ke.

"They say," Tian Guang continued, "that a worthy man does not act in such a way as to arouse distrust in others. Now the prince has warned me that the matter we discussed is of vital concern to the nation and begged me not to let word of it leak out. Obviously he distrusts me, and if my actions have aroused his distrust, then I am no gentleman of honour!" Tian Guang had decided to commit suicide in order to spur Jing Ke to action, and he continued: "I want you to go at once and visit the prince. Tell him I am already dead, so he will know

that I have not betrayed the secret!" With this he cut his throat and died.

Jing Ke went to see the prince and informed him of Tian Guang's death and last words. The prince bowed twice and then, sinking to his knees, crawled forward, the tears starting from his eyes. After some time he said, "I only cautioned Master Tian not to speak so that we could be sure of bringing our plans to a successful conclusion. Now he has actually killed himself to show me that the secret will never be betrayed — as though I could have intended such a thing!"

After Jing Ke had settled himself, the prince moved off his mat, bowed his head, and said, "Master Tian, unaware of how unworthy a person I am, has made it possible for me to speak my thoughts to you. It is clear from this that Heaven has taken pity upon Yan and has not abandoned me altogether.

"Qin has a heart that is greedy for gain, and its desires are insatiable. It will never be content until it has seized all the land in the world and forced every ruler within the four seas to acknowledge its sovereignty. Now, having already taken captive the king of Hann and annexed all his lands, Qin has mobilized its troops to strike against Chu in the south, while in the north it stands poised for an attack on Zhao. Wang Jian, leading several hundred thousand troops, is holding Zhang and Ye, while Li Xin leads another force against Taiyuan and Yunzhong. Zhao, unable to withstand the might of Qin, will undoubtedly submit and swear allegiance to it. And when Zhao has gone under, Yan will stand next in line for disaster!

"Yan is small and weak, and has often fared badly in war. Even if we were to mobilize the entire nation, we obviously could not stand against Qin; and once the other feudal lords have bowed to its rule, none of them will dare to become our allies. Nevertheless, I have a scheme of my own which, foolish as it may be, I would like to suggest — that is, to find a really brave man who would be willing to go as our envoy to the court of Qin and tempt it with some offer of gain. The king of Qin is greedy, and under the circumstances would surely listen to our offer. If this man could then somehow threaten the king, as Cao Mei threatened Duke Huan of Qi,⁴ and force him to return to the feudal lords all the land he has seized, that would be the best we could ask for. And if

⁴ Cao Mei or Cao Mo, a general of the state of Lu, had several times been defeated by the forces of the neighbouring state of Qi and forced to concede lands to Qi. When the rulers of Lu and Qi came together for a meeting, Cao Mei, brandishing a dagger, threatened the Qi ruler, Duke Huan (r. 685-643 BC), and forced him to return the lands to Lu. Cao Mei's is the first of the five biographies that make up "The Biographies of the Assassin-Retainers".

that proved impossible, he might still be able to stab and kill the king. With the Qin generals free to do as they wished with the troops in the outlying areas, and the Qin court in a state of confusion, dissension would surely arise between ruler and subject. The feudal lords could then take advantage of the situation to band together once more, and in that case the defeat of Qin would be inevitable. This is what I would like to see more than anything else, but I do not know who could be entrusted with such a mission. I can only ask that you give it some thought!"

After some time Jing Ke said, "This is a matter of grave importance to the state. I am a person of little worth and I fear I would be unfit for such a mission."

The prince moved forward and, bowing his head, begged and begged Jing Ke to accept the proposal and not to decline any longer, until at last Jing Ke gave his consent. The prince then honoured him with the title of Chief Minister and assigned him the finest quarters in the capital. Every day the prince went to call at his mansion, presenting gifts of food, supplying him with all manner of luxuries, and from time to time pressing him to accept carriages, rider attendants, and waiting women, indulging his every wish so as to insure his cooperation.

Time passed, but Jing Ke showed no inclination to set out on the mission. Meanwhile the Qin general Wang Jian defeated Zhao, took prisoner its king, and annexed its entire territory. Then he advanced north, seizing control of the land as he went, until he reached the southern border of the state of Yan. Crown Prince Dan, filled with terror, begged Jing Ke to set off. "Any moment now the Qin forces may cross the Yi River, and if that happens, though I might wish to continue to wait upon you, how could I do so?"

"I intended to say something, whether you mentioned it or not," said Jing Ke. "The trouble is that, if I set off now, without any means of gaining the confidence of the king of Qin, I will never be able to get close to him. The king of Qin has offered 1,000 catties of gold and a city of 10,000 households in exchange for the life of his former general, Fan Yuqi. If I could get the head of General Fan and a map of the Dukang region of Yan, and offer to present these to the king of Qin, he would certainly be delighted to receive me. Then I would have a chance to carry out our plan."

But the prince replied, "General Fan has come here in trouble and distress and entrusted himself to me. I could never bear to betray the trust of a worthy man for the sake of my own personal desires. I beg you to think of some other plan."

Jing Ke realized that the prince would never bring himself to carry out his suggestion, and so he went in private to see Fan Yuqi. "Qin's treatment of you

has been harsh indeed!" he said. "Your father, your mother, and all the members of your family have been done away with; and now I hear that Qin has offered a reward of 1,000 catties of gold and a city of 10,000 households for your head! What do you intend to do?"

Fan Yuqi looked up to heaven and gave a great sigh, tears streaming down his face. "I think of nothing else, until the ache of it is in my very bones! But I do not know what I can do!"

"Suppose I said that one word from you could dispel the troubles of the state of Yan and avenge the wrong you have suffered?"

Fan Yuqi leaned forward. "What is it?" he asked.

"Give me your head, so that I can present it to the king of Qin! Then he will surely be delighted to receive me. With my left hand I will seize hold of his sleeve, with my right I'll stab him in the breast, and all your wrongs will be avenged and all the shameful insults which Yan has suffered will be wiped out! What do you say?"

Fan Yuqi bared his shoulder and gripped his wrist in a gesture of determination. Moving forward, he said, "Day and night I gnash my teeth and eat out my heart trying to think of some plan. Now you have shown me the way!" Then he cut his throat.

When the crown prince heard what had happened, he rushed to the spot and, throwing himself upon the corpse, wept in deep sorrow. But, since there was nothing that could be done, he took Fan Yuqi's head and sealed it in a box. Earlier he had ordered a search for the sharpest dagger that could be found, and had purchased one from a man of Zhao named Xu Furen for 100 measures of gold. He ordered his artisans to coat the blade with poison and try it out on some men; though the thrust drew hardly enough blood to stain the robe of the victim, every one of the men dropped dead on the spot. The prince then began to make final preparations for sending Master Jing on his mission. There was a brave man of Yan named Qin Wuyang who at age thirteen had murdered someone, and was so fierce that no one dared even to look at him crossly. This man the prince ordered to act as a second to Jing Ke.

There was another man whom Jing Ke wished to have along in his party, but he lived a long way off and had not yet arrived in Yan. Meanwhile preparations for the journey were completed but, though time passed, Jing Ke still did not set off. The prince began to fret at the delay and to suspect that Jing Ke had changed his mind. He therefore went to Jing Ke and pressed his request. "The day for departure has already passed, and I am wondering what you intend

to do. Perhaps I should send Qin Wuyang on ahead ...”

“What do you mean, send Qin Wuyang on ahead?” roared Jing Ke angrily. “Send that little wretch alone and you may be sure he’ll never return successful — setting off with a single dagger to face the immeasurable might of Qin! The reason I have delayed is that I was waiting for a friend I wanted to go with me. But, if you feel it is growing too late, I beg to take my leave.”

Then he set out. The crown prince and all his associates who knew what was happening put on white robes and caps of mourning to see the party off, accompanying them as far as the Yi River. After they had sacrificed to the god of the road and chosen their route, Gao Jianli struck up his lute and Jing Ke joined in with a song in the mournful *bianzhi* mode. Tears streamed from the eyes of the company. Jing Ke came forward and sang this song:

Winds cry *xiao xiao*,
 Yi waters are cold.
 Brave men, once gone,
 Never come back again.

Shifting to the *yu* mode with its martial air, Jing Ke sang once more; this time the eyes of the men flashed with anger and their hair bristled beneath their caps. Then he mounted his carriage and set off, never once looking back.

In time he arrived in Qin, where he presented gifts worth 1,000 measures of gold to Meng Jia, an attendant to the sons of the nobility and one of the king’s favourite ministers. Meng Jia in turn spoke on his behalf to the king of Qin: “The king of Yan, trembling with awe before Your Majesty’s might, has not ventured to call out his troops to oppose our forces, but requests that he and all his people may become vassals of Qin, so that he may be ranked among the other feudal lords and present tribute and perform labour services in the manner of a province or a district; in this way he hopes to be allowed to continue the sacrifices at the temple of his ancestors, the former kings of Yan. In his terror he has not dared to come and speak in person, but has respectfully sent the severed head of Fan Yuqi sealed in a box, along with a map of the Dukang region in Yan, to be presented to you. Bowing respectfully in his courtyard, he has sent these gifts, dispatching his envoys to inquire Your Majesty’s pleasure. He awaits your command.”

When the king of Qin heard this, he was delighted and, donning his court robes and ordering a full dress reception, he received the envoys of Yan in the

Xianyang Palace. Jing Ke bore the box with Fan Yuqi's head, while Qin Wuyang carried the map case; step by step they advanced through the throne room until they reached the steps of the throne, where Qin Wuyang suddenly turned pale and began to quake with fear. The courtiers eyed him suspiciously. Jing Ke turned around, laughed at Qin Wuyang, and then stepped forward to apologize: "This man is a simple rustic from the barbarous region of the northern border, and he has never seen the Son of Heaven. That is why he shakes with fright. I beg Your Majesty to pardon him for the moment and permit me to complete my mission before you."

"Bring the map he is carrying!" said the king to Jing Ke, who took the map container from Qin Wuyang and presented it to the king. The king opened the container, and when he had removed the map, the dagger appeared. At that moment Jing Ke seized the king's sleeve with his left hand, while with his right he snatched up the dagger and held it pointed at the king's breast, but he did not stab him. The king jerked back in alarm and leapt from his seat, tearing the sleeve off his robe. He tried to draw his sword, but it was long and clung to the scabbard and, since it hung vertically at his side, he could not, in his haste, manage to get it out.

Jing Ke ran after the king, who dashed around the pillar of the throne room. All the courtiers, utterly dumbfounded by so unexpected an occurrence, milled about in disorder.

According to Qin law, no courtier or attendant who waited upon the king in the upper throne room was permitted to carry a weapon of any kind. The palace attendants who bore arms were ranged in the lower hall, and without a command from the king they were forbidden to ascend to the throne room. In his panic the king had no chance to give a command to the soldiers to appear, and thus Jing Ke was able to pursue him. Having nothing with which to strike at Jing Ke, the king in panic-stricken confusion merely flailed at him with his hands. At the same time the physician Xia Wuju, who was in attendance, battered Jing Ke with the medicine bag he was carrying.

The king continued to circle the pillar, unable in his confusion to think of anything else to do. "Push the scabbard around behind you!" shouted the king's attendants, and, when he did this, he was at last able to draw his sword and strike at Jing Ke, slashing him across the left thigh. Jing Ke, staggering to the ground, raised the dagger and hurled it at the king, but it missed and struck the bronze pillar. The king attacked Jing Ke again.

Jing Ke, wounded now in eight places, realized that his attempt had failed.

Leaning against the pillar, his legs sprawled before him, he began to laugh and curse the king. "I failed because I tried to threaten you without actually killing you and exact a promise that I could take back to the crown prince!" As he spoke, the king's attendants rushed forward to finish him off.

It was a long time before the king regained his composure. When at last he came to himself, he discussed with his ministers the question of who deserved a reward for his part in the incident, and who deserved punishment. To the physician Xia Wuju he presented 200 taels of gold, "because Xia Wuju, out of love for me, hit Jing Ke with his medicine bag."

After this the king in a rage dispatched more troops to join his army in Zhao and commanded Wang Jian to attack Yan. Ten months later the Qin army captured the city of Ji. King Xi of Yan, Prince Dan, and the others of the court, leading their best troops, fled east to Liaodong for safety. The Qin general Li Xin pursued and attacked them with ever increasing fury.

King Jia of Dai sent a letter to King Xi of Yan which read: "It is all because of Prince Dan that Qin is harassing you with such vehemence. If you would only do away with the prince and present his corpse to Qin, the king's anger would surely be appeased and he would leave you in peace to carry on the sacrifices to your altars of the soil and grain."

Shortly after this, Li Xin pursued Prince Dan as far as the Yan River, where the prince hid among the islands of the river. Meanwhile the king of Yan sent an envoy to cut off the prince's head, intending to present it to Qin, but Qin dispatched more troops and reopened its attack on Yan. Five years later, Qin finally destroyed the state of Yan and took its ruler, King Xi, prisoner. The following year (221 BC), the king of Qin united all the empire under his rule and assumed the title of August Emperor.

The Qin ruler then began a campaign to ferret out the associates of Prince Dan and Jing Ke, and as a result they all went into hiding. Gao Jianli, who was among the group, changed his name, hired himself out as an indentured workman, and went into hiding in a household in the city of Songzi, enduring for a long time the hardships of a labourer's life. Whenever he heard some guest of the family playing the lute in the main hall of the house, he would linger outside, unable to tear himself away, and after each performance he would say, "That man plays well" or "That man is not very good". One of the servants reported this to the master of the house, saying, "That hired man must know something about music, since he ventures to pass judgment on everyone's playing."

The master of the house summoned Gao Jianli to appear and play the lute before his guests, and when he did so, everyone in the company praised his playing and pressed wine on him. Gao Jianli thought of the long time he had been in hiding, and of the seemingly endless years of hardship and want that lay ahead; finally he went back to his room, got his lute and good clothes out of the trunk where he had stored them and, changing his clothes, appeared once more in the hall. The guests were overcome with surprise and, bowing and making room for him as an equal, they led him to the seat of honour and requested him to play the lute and sing. When the performance was over, there was not a guest who left the house dry-eyed.

Gao Jianli was entertained at one home after another in Songzi, and in time his fame reached the ears of the Qin emperor. The emperor summoned him to an audience, but when he appeared, someone who had known him in the past exclaimed, "This is Gao Jianli!" The emperor, unable to bring himself to kill such a skilled musician, ordered his eyes put out and commanded him to play in his presence. The emperor never failed to praise his playing and gradually allowed him to come nearer and nearer. Gao Jianli then got a heavy piece of lead and fastened it inside his lute, and the next time he was summoned to play at the emperor's side, he raised the lute and struck at the emperor. He missed and was summarily executed, and after that the emperor never again permitted any of the former followers of the feudal lords to approach his person.

When Lu Goujian heard of Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate the king of Qin, he sighed to himself and said, "What a pity that he never properly mastered the art of swordsmanship! And as for me — how blind I was to his real worth! That time when I shouted at him in anger, he must have thought I was hardly human!"

The Grand Historian remarks: When people these days tell the story of Jing Ke, they assert that at the command of Prince Dan the heavens rained grain and horses grew horns.⁵ This is of course a gross error. They likewise say that Jing Ke actually wounded the king of Qin, which is equally untrue. At one time Gongsun Jigong and Master Dong were friends of the physician Xia Wuju and

⁵ An anonymous fictionalized version of the Jing Ke story, which contains this detail, has been handed down, in somewhat battered state, under the title "Prince Dan of Yan". It is translated in Wolfgang Bauer and Herbert Franke, eds., *The Golden Casket* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), pp. 30-41.

they learned from him exactly what happened. I have therefore reported everything just as they told it to me.

Of these five men, from Cao Mei to Jing Ke, some succeeded in carrying out their duty and some did not. But it is perfectly clear that they had all determined upon the deed. They were not false to their intentions. Is it not right, then, that their names should be handed down to later ages?