

The Wu Liang Ci scene depicts the moment when Zhuan Zhu has just ripped open the fish and holds the dagger about to kill the king. The fish plate has not yet fallen to the ground, and two of the king's soldiers are already slashing the assassin with their long halberds.

Most stories of assassins recorded in the *Shi Ji* are also found in the *Zhanguo Ce*, which does not, however, provide a full description of Zhuan Zhu's assassination of King Liao. In the *Zhanguo Ce*, Zhuan Zhu is treated as an outstandingly brave man who is so familiar that he needs no explanation. The earliest full version of Zhuan Zhu's story is found in the *Zuo Zhuan*.¹⁶⁵ Though brief, it contains the basic elements that were later developed in the *Shi Ji*. The story also appears in other Han and post-Han works, including the *Wu-Yue Chunqiu*, *Yue Jue Shu*, and others, with minor modifications.¹⁶⁶ Qu Zhongrong has noted a detail that may disclose a closer relationship between the Wu Liang Ci picture and the passage in the *Wu-Yue Chunqiu*. The weapons used by King Liao's attendants are described in the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Shi Ji* as *pi*, or swords, but in the *Wu-Yue Chunqiu* they are identified as *changji*, or long halberds.¹⁶⁷ The weapons depicted on the Wu Liang Ci are clearly halberds rather than swords.

SCENE 3: Jing Ke's Attempted Assassination of the King of Qin (Fig. 148)

Inscriptions

Jing Ke 荆軻
Fan Yuqi's head 樊於其頭
Qin Wuyang 秦武陽
the king of Qin 秦王

Textual references

Jing Ke is perhaps the most famous assassin in Chinese history, although his attempted assassination of Ying Zheng, the future First Qin Emperor, has a tragic ending. According to the *Zhanguo Ce* and the *Shi Ji*, Jing Ke was from the state of Wei. After traveling in different kingdoms, he finally reached the capital of Yan, where he was recognized by a wise man, Tian Guang, as an unusual retainer.

At the time, Prince Dan of Yan (Yan Dan Wang) was seeking a brave man to assassinate the king of Qin, who had not only humiliated the prince but whose military power also threatened all the other states. Tian Guang recommended Jing Ke to carry out this mission. Before he set out, two valuable men gave up

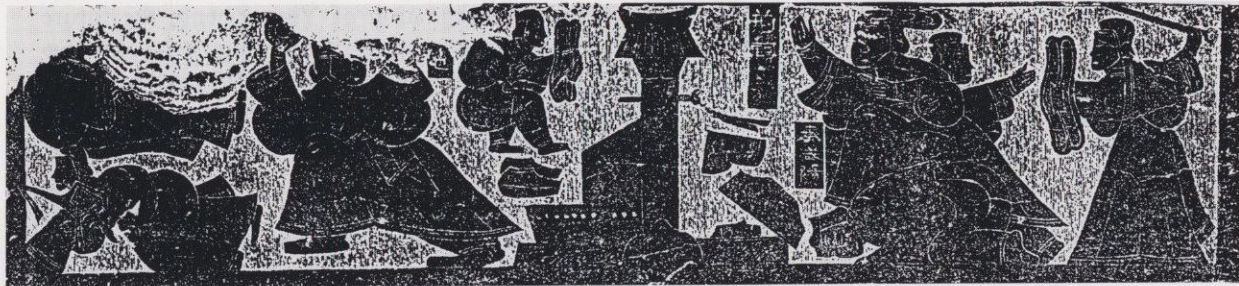
Fig. 148. Jing Ke's attempted assassination of the King of Qin. Wu Liang Ci wall carving. (a) Ink rubbing (Rong Geng 1936: 11b-12b); (b) reconstruction (Feng Yunpeng and Feng Yunyuan 1821: "Shi Suo," 3.30-31). (c) A scene on the eleventh stone of the Front Chamber (Chavannes 1913: vol. 2, pl. 55, no. 113).



a



b



c

their lives for the plan. The first was Tian Guang, who committed suicide to keep the secret, and the other was General Fan Yuqi, a refugee from Qin, who offered his head to Jing Ke so the assassin could win the trust of the king of Qin. Prince Dan bought a very sharp dagger from Zhao for a hundred measures of gold and ordered his artisans to coat the blade with poison. He also found an assistant for Jing Ke. This man, Qin Wuyang, had become a murderer at the age of thirteen and was so fierce that no one dared even to look at him crossly.

So Jing Ke arrived at Qin, and the King of Qin held an audience in the Xianyang Palace. The following passage from the *Shi Ji* vividly describes the meeting.

Ching K'o [Jing Ke] bore the box with Fan Yü-ch'i's [Fan Yuqi] head, while Ch'in Wu-yang [Qin Wuyang] carried the map case; step by step they advanced through the throne room until they reached the steps of the throne, where Ch'in Wu-yang suddenly turned pale and began to quake with fear. The courtiers eyed him suspiciously. Ching K'o turned around, laughed at Ch'in Wu-yang, 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 here before you."

"Bring the map he is carrying!" said the king to Ching K'o, who took the map container from Ch'in Wu-yang and presented it to the king. The king opened the container, and when he had removed the map, the dagger appeared. At that moment Ching K'o 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.

Ching K'o 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 Ch'in [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 for the soldiers to appear, and thus Ching K'o was able to pursue him. Having nothing with which to strike at Ching K'o, the king in panic-stricken confusion merely flailed at him with his hands. At the same time the physician Hsia Wu-chü [Xia Wuju], who was in attendance, battered Ching K'o 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 Ching K'o, slashing him across the left thigh. Ching K'o, staggering to the ground, raised the dagger and hurled it at the king, but it missed and struck the bronze pillar. The king attacked Ching K'o again.

Ching K'o, 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.¹⁶⁸

In the Wu Liang scene, Jing Ke has just hurled the dagger at the king. This is indicated both by Jing Ke's gesture and by a detail — although the dagger has struck the pillar, its ribbon still flies straight back to represent motion. Jing Ke's cap has been lost in his struggling and his hair swings back like a sword. An attendant holds Jing Ke with both arms, but seems hardly able to compel him to submit. He is the only hero in the scene: the king flees on the other side of the pillar and Qin Wuyang lies prostrate in fear. Two details further point out the tragic nature of the event: General Fan's head lies quietly in an open box, and the dagger is nailed to the pillar.

Scholars have suggested that Sima Qian's biography of Jing Ke is based on the account in the *Zhanguo Ce* and that the *Shi Ji* version in turn provided materials for a later work, the *Yan Danzi*.¹⁶⁹

The Wu Liang Ci carving shows the point of the dagger protruding from the other side of the pillar. This rather exaggerated detail is absent in the *Shi Ji* description, but is faithfully depicted in all three pictorial representations of the story in the Wu family shrines (the other two are in the Left and Front shrines; see Figs. 29, 148c). In this light, a passage in Wang Chong's *Lun Heng* is interesting.

The books of the Literati tell us that for the Prince of Yen [Yan], Ching K'o attempted to assassinate the King of Ch'in. He struck him with a stiletto, but did not hit. The King of Ch'in then drew his sword and struck him. When Ching K'o assaulted the King of Ch'in with a stiletto, he did not hit his adversary, but a copper pillar, into which the dagger entered a foot deep. With these words one wishes to emphasize the sharpness of the stiletto.

Ching K'o was a powerful man. He thrust the sharp blade, so that it penetrated into the hard pillar. In order to exalt Ching K'o's courage people have coloured the real facts. It is true that the stiletto went into the copper pillar, but the assertion that it entered a foot deep is an ex-

aggeration; the latter cannot penetrate deeper than some inches, [much less] one foot.¹⁷⁰

We cannot identify the “books of the Literati” criticized by Wang Chong. However, Wang Chong lived during the second half of the second century A.D. and this suggests that these books circulated at about the same time as the construction of the Wu Liang Ci. As Wang Chong indicated, these literary works tended to dramatize the story, a tendency visible in the Wu carving.

Slab 2 (the east wall of the Wu Liang Ci)

SCENE 4: Yao Li's Assassination of Prince Qing Ji (Fig. 149)

Inscriptions

Prince Qing Ji 王慶忌

Yao Li 要離

Textual references

Yao Li is described in texts as a man who is physically weak but outstandingly brave. Guang, now the king of Wu, has had Zhuan Zhu murder King Liao (see above), and he wants to kill the former king's son, Prince Qing Ji. However, Qing Ji is powerful, and his strength is said to equal that of ten thousand men. He can overtake a galloping beast on his two feet and catch a flying bird with his bare hands; his bones jumping up and his flesh flying, he can slap his knees for several hundred *li*. Facing such an enemy, Wu Zixu again recommends an outstanding assassin, Yao Li.

The assassination has proceeded according to Yao Li's plan. He first pretends to be accused of a crime and flees the country. The king of Wu seizes his wife and children and burns and exposes them in the marketplace. Yao Li then takes refuge among the feudal lords, peddling his grievances until his innocence is noised far and wide. Having won Qing Ji's trust, Yao Li accompanies him across the Yangzi River to attack the king of Wu. The following passage, which is represented in the Wu Liang Ci carving, is quoted from the *Wu-Yue Chunqiu*.

They were crossing the Yangtze when, in midstream, Yao Li—who, being of little strength, had sat upwind of him in order to use the force of the wind and had attached a spearhook to his cap—fell with the wind and stabbed Ch'ing-chi [Qing Ji]. Ch'ing-chi looked around at him and brushed him off; thrice he shoved his head under water and then set him on his knees: “Ha, ha, what a brave man you are, that you dare lay your blade on me.” His attendants wished to kill him, but Ch'ing-chi stopped them, saying: “He is a very brave man. How can two brave men be