An Analysis of Jing Ke's Character Construction in History Books—Comparing Strategies of the Warring States and Records of the Grand Historian

Yiqing Chen*

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Jiangsu, 215123, China

*Corresponding author: Yiqing.Chen23@student.xjtlu.edu.cn

Abstract. The record of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* focuses on historical facts and strategies. On the other hand, Sima Qian made a profound literary shaping of Jing Ke's image in *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins*. Based on the close reading of the text and using the method of comparative research, this paper aims to explore the differences in the characterization of Jing Ke and the motivations behind it in these two history books. It found that the description of Jing Ke in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* has relatively thick lines, focusing more on the incident of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin and the embodiment of the "strategy" behind it; whereas *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* has literary reshaping of Jing Ke's personal image and the construction of tragic heroes, highlighting his tragic color and heroism. The reason for this is that *Strategies of the Warring States* is related to its stylistic nature and purpose of compilation, the values and narrative traditions of the Warring States Period, while *Records of the Grand Historian* is related to Sima Qian's personal experience, the political and cultural context at that time, and Sima Qian's admiration for "Shi" and his thoughts on the destiny of history.

Keywords: *Strategies of the Warring States*; *Records of the Grand Historian*; Jing Ke; character image; literary construction.

1. Introduction

The depiction of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin and Jing Ke's characterization varies in different historical books. Take *Strategies of the Warring States* and *Records of the Grand Historian* for example, *Strategies of the Warring States* is a concise and pragmatic narrative, and the record of Jing Ke focuses more on the process of his assassination of the King of Qin itself, presenting a relatively objective and "instrumental" characteristic. Jing Ke is an assassin with a political mission, and his image is clear but slightly flat. When writing *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian injected his deep insight and subjective analysis, centered the narrative on Jing Ke himself, and shaped his character into a flesh-and-blood one.

Currently there are few studies on this topic in Chinese and foreign academic circles. There is almost no foreign literature, only Zhang examined the narratives about Jing Ke's stories from the pre-Qin to Han Dynasties, but did not only focus on history books but extensive history [1]; there are also Shi and Wang specialized in Jing Ke's biographies in *Records of the* Grand *Historian*, but their research focuses on the exegesis of words [2]. In recent years, Chinese literature mainly focuses on the study of Jing Ke in *Records of the Grand Historian*, and most of them use Jing Ke to analyze the revenge type text writing of *Records of the Grand Historian* and Sima Qian's writing style, or use it to analyze the reasons and characteristics [3-5]. For instance, in *The Origin and Characteristics of the Style of Records of the Grand Historian*, Wei Gengyuan summarizes that the style of Sima Qian and *Records of the Grand Historian* has a great relationship with the previous culture, the era, and the geographic environment by analyzing the characters such as Jing Ke [5]. Some literature also explores the doubtful aspects of Jing Ke's character image in *Records of the Grand Historian* [6]. There is not much literature analyzing Jing Ke in *Strategies of the Warring States*, mainly Yuan Ze lamented that he was not a good assassin and the tragedy that he was born at the wrong time according

to the description of Jing Ke in *Strategies of the Warring States* [7]. In summary, the existing studies focus more on the record of Jing Ke in a particular history book itself, especially *Records of the Grand Historian*, without comparing it with other historical books, such as *Strategies of the Warring States*. Only Yang Xueyi has compared the difference between Jing Ke's image in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* and *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* [8]. However, he also used only a few descriptions as examples, without systematically analyzing them and specifically studying the reasons behind such writing.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the embodiment of Jing Ke's character image and the reasons behind it in the two different history books, *Strategies of the Warring States* and *Records of the Grand Historian*, which is very meaningful for the study of both the historical and literary constructs of history books. In this paper, the characteristics of Jing Ke's characterization in *Strategies of the Warring States* and *Records of the Grand Historian* will be analyzed, and the focus of their literary depictions and the reasons behind the construction will also be explored. Based on a close reading of the texts, this paper will adopt a comparative research method to compare and analyze the differences of Jing Ke's character image in the two history books, so as to find out the different writing styles and reasons behind. Through it, this paper hopes to present Jing Ke's character image more clearly, and at the same time to reveal the essence of the narrative art and literary construction of *Strategies of the Warring States* and *Records of the Grand Historian*, seeing big from small.

2. The Image of Jing Ke in Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San

The narrative of Jing Ke in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* pays more attention to historical facts and objectivity, and his image is outlined in a rough line, lacking in elaboration and rendering. Yang Xueyi summarizes the description of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* as "a linear account and tactics of strategists" [8]. Indeed, the description of Jing Ke in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* is overall concise and emotionally neutral. The article begins with Dan, the prince of Yan, worried about Qin's annexation of the world, hoping to find a good man to assassinate the King of Qin. It directly starts from the background of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin, without introducing Jing Ke's life. Jing Ke's appearance just begins with Prince Dan sending Tian Guang to invite him. The latter narrative of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin is concise in language, does not deliberately render emotion or character psychology and add subjective evaluation or moral judgment. From this it can be seen that its narrative focuses on the assassination itself rather than on the characterization of Jing Ke. Although the text contains details of Jing Ke's actions, dialogues, and the assassination process, such as "The Dagger in the Map", "The King of Qin Walked Around the Pillar", and "Ke Knew that he would not be able to do anything, and then leaned on the pillar, laughed and scolded", they are all centered around the event of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin, without adding the rendering of Jing Ke himself, but only for the service of narrating the event [9].

The lack of specific and detailed characterization makes *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* not give Jing Ke a strong sense of personal destiny and tragic hero color. For example, Jing Ke's failure is calmly narrated and passed over, and the whole text almost never involves the deeper exploration of Jing Ke's inner world or motivation, just like "walking the plot". It can be said that Prince Dan regarded Jing Ke as a tool to eliminate threats, and *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* also regarded Jing Ke as a tool for elaborating events and strategies. In essence, the author emphasizes the "strategy" rather than the "person", which is more political and utilitarian, and his words contain more of a reflection of strategy than a display of characters. Therefore, *Strategies of the Warring States* only provides a more objective "historical prototype" for the image of Jing Ke, without focusing on portrayal and rendering, not to mention injecting emotions.

3. The Image of Jing Ke in Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins

In contrast, Sima Qian has literarily reshaped and sublimated Jing Ke in *Records of the Grand Historian*. The depiction of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin in *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* is basically the same as that in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San*, but the length of the article is much longer than that in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San*. This is because Sima Qian added the narrative embellishment and subjective evaluation for Jing Ke, and carried out literary remodeling and tragic hero image construction.

First of all, *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* has frontal and lateral depictions of Jing Ke at the beginning and the end. For instance, the opening paragraph first describes Jing Ke's life and experience: compared with *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San*, in which Jing Ke appeared only when Tian Guang asked him to come out, *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* introduces Jing Ke at the very beginning, "Jing Ke, a native of Wei. ..... He was a good scholar and a good swordsman. .....", which frontally summarizes his personal background [10]. Next, his conflicts with Gai Nie and Lu Jujian, and his friendship with Gao Jianli and Tian Guang are also interspersed, which reflect his deep character and diversified characterization, thus highlighting Jing Ke as an "individual" and using him as the main perspective to develop the following narrative. Finally, after Jing Ke was killed, Sima Qian wrote about Gao Jianli's intention to continue to assassinate the King of Qin and Lu Jujian's regret for having reprimanded Jing Ke to reflect Jing Ke's heroic image and spirituality, as well as the influence and infection he left in others' hearts. At the end of the whole article, Sima Qian also left his own comments, "But his intention is more natural, not deceiving his will, and his name will be remembered in future generations, is it not delusional!" [10]. Even though Jing Ke did not succeed in assassinating the King of Qin, Sima Qian thought that he did not violate his conscience, was heroic, and deserved to remain famous in history, all of which also reflected his personal tendency to esteem Jing Ke.

Secondly, some subtle differences from the description of the event in the *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* also reflect Sima Qian's portrayal of Jing Ke's personal tragic hero image in *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins*. In *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San*, the description of Jing Ke's murder is "Both the left and right sides went forward to chop Jing Ke", while in *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins*, it is "Then both the left and right sides went forward to kill Ke" [9,10]. "Chop" is more ceremonial and sharp, while "kill" is only an elaboration of the result of the deprivation of life, without deliberately emphasizing how to die. Sima Qian used"kill" to summarize Jing Ke's death rather than "Chop", reflecting his pity and regret for Jing Ke's murder. Also, to showcase the king of Qin's reaction to Jing Ke's attempt to assassinate him, *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* wrote that "the king of Qin was dazzled for a long time", which means his eyes were dizzy for a long time, and suffered from physical shock; whereas, *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* wrote that "the king of Qin was not pleased for a long time" [9 ,10]. This rise from physical discomfort to psychological sullenness reflects the shock and humiliation that Jing Ke brought to the king of Qin, which is more capable of reflecting Jing Ke's heroism and personal greatness.

On the whole, Sima Qian, through narrative embellishment and image construction, uses literary expression and detail shaping to highlight Jing Ke's individuality in *Records of the Grand Historian*, which reflects his tragic heroism and shows Sima Qian's admiration for him.

4. Reasons for the Description and Construction of Strategies of the Warring States

From the analysis of Jing Ke's character image, it can be seen that there is a difference in the tendency of literary construction between *Strategies of the Warring States* and *Records of the Grand Historian*. As mentioned above, the overall focus of *Strategies of the Warring States* is on the

“strategy” rather than the “person”, and the characterization of Jing Ke is relatively flat,which is for two reasons. The first one is related to its stylistic nature and purpose of compilation. *Strategies of the Warring States* is not a history book in the strict sense, but a compilation of the speeches and strategies of some curators and strategists of the Warring States period. Its core purpose was to demonstrate lobbying skills, political strategies and diplomacy for the study and reference of the scholars at that time and later generations. Therefore, the narrative of the book often serves the embodiment of “strategy”, emphasizing the effectiveness of stratagems, rather than focusing on the portrayal of characters. In this context, Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin is a high-risk political action, and the author wants to depict the planning process in detail, such as the anxiety of Prince Dan, Tian Guang's suicide to provoke Jing Ke, Fan Yuqi's initiative to offer his head, and so on, so as to emphasize the thoroughness and drama of the strategy design. In the author's view, the details of the characters' psychology and characterization are not directly related to the strategy and are not the focus of the narrative, so they are naturally abbreviated.

Second, this is also related to the values and narrative traditions of the Warring States Period. During the Warring States Period, a hundred schools of thought contended for supremacy, and the ideological and political circles were generally concerned with political effectiveness and social change, so that the fate of the individual was often placed in the current of the times, and would not be emphasized prominently. As an assassin, Jing Ke was regarded as a tool to realize the survival of Yan and the plan to assassinate the King of Qin, and his image was symbolized as a symbol of “chivalry” rather than an independent individual. In addition, from the point of view of the narrative tradition at that time, although the pre-Qin historical literature already had the prototype of characterization, the whole is still based on the storytelling, and the characterization is mostly fragmentary and not the focus. *Strategies of the Warring States* also continues this tradition, with the dialogues and actions of the characters often serving to advance events rather than reflecting their spiritual connotations and individual images.

5. Reasons for the Description and Construction of Records of the Grand Historian

Generally speaking, history records need to be as objective as *Strategies of the Warring States*, so *Records of the Grand Historian*'s emphasis on characterization is relatively unique. Why did Sima Qian focus on such literary depictions and constructs? What are the reasons behind it? Firstly, it has to do with his personal experience. In addition to Records of the Grand Historian, Sima Qian has only two articles, *Fu on Lamenting the Unrecognized Worthy Man* and *Letter to Ren An*, which describes the bitterness of his life [9]. Since he suffered the castration, he has endured to survive, “At home, I am listless and disconsolate; abroad, I drift aimlessly. Each recollection of this shame drenches my clothes with sweat streaming down my back!”. Sima Qian's life is full of tragedy, which makes him able to sympathize with the characters in history who are also full of tragedy, and emphasize praising them. Jing Ke is one of the most representative figures. His fate was undoubtedly tragic. He was a Yan assassin who failed to achieve his goal and died without closing his eyes. However, his assassination of the King of Qin was also courageous and heroic. Sima Qian highlights the tragic fate of Jing Ke, but also highlights his heroic color, which is also related to his own life. Although Sima Qian was tortured by the castration, he still created the heirloom masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian* in the midst of endless grief and pain, and both he and Jing Ke were sympathetic to each other as heroes.

Secondly, this is also related to the political and cultural context at that time. Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty recruited a lot of capable people for his hegemony, and the society at that time respected loyalty, righteousness and national integrity. Sima Qian was in such a political and cultural context, and naturally preferred to depict this type of historical figures. Jing Ke is synonymous with loyalty and righteousness, and in order to honor his friend and Prince Dan, Jing Ke gave up his life and tried

his best to assassinate the King of Qin. Sima Qian hoped that by singing the praises of Jing Ke, he could make more people admire loyalty and righteousness and national integrity.

Thirdly, Sima Qian also hoped to express his admiration for “Shi” and his thoughts on the destiny of history by portraying Jing Ke's image. In *Records of the Grand Historian-Preface by the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian writes: “Upholding what is right, untrammeled in spirit, refusing to let the moment pass them by, they made their names famous throughout the realm. These are the ones I have portrayed in the seventy ‘Biographies’.” [10]. He wrote seventy biographies, including the assassin biography, in order to highlight the spirit of “Shi”, who were brave and righteous, full of heroism, and were "extraordinary people", and should leave their names at that time and in future generations. At the same time, including Jing Ke and other tragic stories throughout the first and last, *Records of the Grand Historian* itself is a tragic history, the bottom color is the pathos of the bleak [9]. This reflects Sima Qian's higher-than-normal vision and very characteristic thinking about the fate of history. Every step forward in history has to pay the price of blood, and countless people push history forward with their flesh and blood, which shows Sima Qian's tragic feelings.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper compares the differences between the narratives of Jing Ke's character image in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* and *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins*, and examines the reasons behind the differences. The narrative of *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* pays more attention to historical facts and objectivity, and depicts Jing Ke as an individual in a more coarse line, focusing more on the event of Jing Ke's assassination of the King of Qin and the embodiment of the “strategy” behind it; whereas, *Records of the Grand Historian-Biography of Assassins* has carried out literary remodeling of Jing Ke's personal image and constructed the tragedy of a hero, with Sima Qian focusing on Jing Ke as an “individual”, and highlighting his tragic color and heroism. Such a construction of *Strategies of the Warring States* is related to its stylistic nature and purpose of compilation, as well as the values and narrative traditions of the Warring States Period; while the reasons for such a literary portrayal in *Records of the Grand Historian* are mainly related to three points: Sima Qian's personal experience, the political and cultural contexts of the time, as well as Sima Qian's respect for “Shi” and his thinking about the fate of history. By carefully comparing the classic cases in *Strategies of the Warring States-Yan Ce San* and *Records of the Grand* Historian-*Biography of Assassins*, this paper clearly demonstrates the detailed exploration of Jing Ke's character image, and the different focuses and reasons behind the literary construction of different history books. In the future, the portrayal of Jing Ke's character and the reasons behind it in other history books can be explored, so as to make a broader comparison.

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