

# Reader-response Criticism of Image of Genghis Khan in *Legends of the Condor Heroes*

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**Abstract:** Genghis Khan is a great statesman and strategist in Chinese history, who has made outstanding contributions to the unification and development of China and exerted great influences on many countries or regions in Europe and Asia. The images of Genghis Khan presented in different historical records and literary works are completely different in the eyes of readers. His image presents to be a national hero, a benevolent Lord, an aggressor and a tyrant, which is full of controversy. In 2018, *Legends of the Condor Heroes (English translation)*, one of the most famous masterpieces of Chinese martial arts novels, was published in the UK for the first time, attracting the attention of Western readers to Chinese martial arts novels. Genghis Khan, as one of the main characters in the novel, caught the eyes of readers again. Based on the theory of Reader-response criticism, this paper attempts to interpret the image of Genghis Khan in *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, and excavate his image connotation from another perspective.

**Keywords:** Image of Genghis Khan, Reader-response criticism, Blank, Indeterminacy, Disconfirms.

## 1. Introduction

Genghis Khan is a great statesman and strategist in Chinese history. After unifying the tribes in the Mongolian steppe, he and his descendants exterminated the Jin and Song dynasties, set up the Mongolian Empire across the Eurasian continent successively during the western expedition in more than half of a century. He has made outstanding contributions to the unification and development of China and exerted great influence on many countries or regions in Europe and Asia. He has promoted the political reforms and the development of world history and played an unprecedented role in the cultural exchanges between the East and the West. Meanwhile, apart from his legendary life, the image of Genghis Khan, a combination of Mongolian national hero, the benevolent Lord in the Confucian culture and the cruel warmonger and tyrant in the eyes of westerners, makes him the preferences among Chinese and foreign historians and literary creators. Due to the differences in creation period, ideology and authorship (including nationality, ethnic group and social class), the images of Genghis Khan presented in different historical documents and literary works are also completely different in the eyes of readers.

In April 2018, the first volume of *Legends of the Condor Heroes (English translation)*, one of the representative works of the great master of Chinese martial arts novels, Jin Yong, was published in the UK for the first time. It has attracted the attention of Western readers to Chinese martial arts novels and received favourable feedback. At the same time, it has triggered a new round of academic discussion on the kind of literary works with specific cultural background. "*Legends of the Condor Heroes*" describes the growth process of how Guo Jing, protagonist of the novel, turns into a great hero serving for the country and the people from a simple silly boy. It also uses a lot of spaces to depict Genghis Khan's rising from the prairie and finally overturning the world. Based on the theory of Reader-response criticism, this paper attempts to interpret the image of Genghis Khan in Jin Yong's martial arts novel

*Legends of the Condor Heroes (English version)*, and excavates the image connotation from another perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Image of Genghis Khan in Foreign Historical Records and Literary Works

The earliest and most influential book about Mongolia which is widely circulated in Europe is *Tales from the East* (also known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*). In this book, Genghis Khan is described as a ruler who wins the support of people with his wisdom, kindness, fairness and humility.[1] However, *The Travels of Marco Polo* is only a travelogue. Therefore, the discussion in it and even the fact whether Marco Polo himself has really been to China are still controversial issues in the academic circle. The images of Genghis Khan in authoritative historical records are different from that depicted by Marco Polo. In *The History of the World Conquerors*, Zhiferi highlighted the extraordinary military expertise of Genghis Khan, describing him as a ruler of "superior intelligence, creativeness agile and unlimited power". But at the same time, Zhiferi also recorded Genghis Khan's massacre of rebels in the fallen cities on his western conquest.[2] In another authoritative historical work *Jami al-Tawarikh*, Rashid chronicled in detail Genghis Khan's unification of Mongolia and his crusade against Jin. Rashid presented the image of Genghis Khan as "energetic, fearless, just, decisive, and appreciative of the wise".[3] He emphasized that although the Mongolian army was ruthless in killing, it would grant amnesty to residents and soldiers who surrendered voluntarily, and would not hesitate to kill enemies who put up a last-ditch resistance, thus demonstrating the determination of Genghis Khan as a leader. By the Age of the Enlightenment, the image of Genghis Khan (or the positive image of the Mongolians and the East) had changed, and Genghis Khan was portrayed as a "violent, cruel, warlike, vengeful, majestic and dictatorial" ruler. In Voltaire's *The Chinese Orphan*, the initial image of Genghis Khan is also a ruthless military ruler. Only under the influence of

Chinese Confucian moral thought, his image is transformed into the combination of good and evil, enlightened love, sentient and righteous, so as to reflect the moral inspiration of enlightenment philosophy to complex human nature, thus demonstrating the power of civilization.[4]

In the 20th century, related works by authors from different countries once again introduced Genghis Khan to the Western world. There were books like *Glimpses of World History*, written by former Indian Prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru,[5] and the *Great Captains Unveiled*, written by British strategist Liddle Hart.[6] The American historian Harold Lamb gave highly complimentary remarks to Genghis Khan, too. He was described as “the greatest military genius and leader in history”, “the founder of the Mongol Empire, the largest military power in history”, and “more powerful than the most commanding European emperors such as Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon”. With the development of globalization and the broadening of historical vision in the new century, the image of Genghis Khan has changed again. In Jack Weatherford's book *Genghis Khan and the Making of Modern World*, Genghis Khan is transformed from a ruthless, murderous tyrant in the West to a visionary general and innovative leader.[7] He is a ruler who upheld the authority of the law, encouraged religious freedom, founded public schools, granted diplomatic immunity, abolished torture and opened free trade. Genghis Khan is also regarded as the pioneer of early globalization. The advanced culture and technology brought by him and the Mongolian army has promoted and stimulated the unprecedented technology, trade and ideological revolution in Europe in the Dark Ages, and aroused the global human awakening.

## 2.2. Image of Genghis Khan in Chinese Historical Records and Literary Works

In China, the image depiction and comments of Genghis Khan mostly come from various historical records and literary works. With the change of history and times, the images of Genghis Khan are also slightly different in the works of narrators from different cultural backgrounds. The image of Genghis Khan originates from the *Secret History of Mongolia*, the first written masterpiece in the history of Mongolian literature. Its main plot is centered on Temujin's great cause of unifying Mongolia, which is a comprehensive and true reflection of the life of the Mongolian people in northern China in the 13th century and their struggle for survival.[8] *The Secret History of Mongolia* depicts the glorious deeds of Genghis Khan's military life from birth to death with absolute superiority, highlighting his spiritual outlook as the greatest politician, military strategist and thinker of the Mongolian nationality, showing the image of prairie hero, and objectively praising the historical contribution of Genghis Khan. *The Secret History of Mongolia* is a historical and literary masterpiece compiled in Weiwu style Mongolian. It was translated into Chinese in the fifteenth year of Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (1382) and renamed as the *Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty*. Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, ordered the compilation of *The History of Yuan Dynasty*, an official history book representing the official attitude of the Ming Dynasty, which systematically recorded the rise and fall of the Yuan Dynasty, among which the first book *Taizu Benji* gave a brief account of Genghis Khan's whole life.[9] The image of Genghis Khan in *The History of Yuan Dynasty* has removed the wildness, cruelty and coldness of the grassland hero and retained the qualities

of perseverance and courageousness in fighting. More emphasis are put on highlighting his image of feudal Confucian benevolent of being “lenient and virtuous, diligent in government and loving the people, affirmative with unerring intuition”. The 17th century saw the emergence of a large number of Mongolian literature and history classics, such as “*The Survey of the Golden History*” (author unknown), “*The Origin of Mongolia*” (written by Sagan Chechen), etc. Influenced by the religion of Tibetan Buddhism, these works deify Genghis Khan as a tribal leader on the prairie with superhuman courage and extraordinary ability. He is brave and courageous, masculine and tenacious, but also cruel, domineering, capricious and inhuman.[10]

Due to the various class attitude, cultural background and aesthetic orientation, different historians have their own choice of archetypal figures. Therefore, the same historical figure in the works of different historians, each has its own characteristics. Similarly, the same character in the works of different writers presents different images, too. In the 19th century, Yin Zhanahi, an outstanding writer and historian of the Mongolian nationality, created the first full-length historical novel in the Mongolian literature history, describing the flourishing history of the Mongolian nationality in the time of Genghis Khan. Deeply influenced by Confucianism in central China, the author drawn on the beneficial elements of Han literature and culture to describe the complex and course of Tiemujin's growth in the difficult environment, his restoring of ancestral heritage, founding of the Mongol Khanate and finally becoming Genghis Khan. The image of Genghis Khan described by Yin Zhanahi is a broad-minded and enlightened monarch, who is wise, generous, kind-hearted, virtuous and far-sighted. These outstanding characteristics are significant changes to the image of Genghis Khan in the past Mongolian historical literature.[11] In the late 20th century, especially in the latest 40 years, the theme of Genghis Khan re-entered literary works, and a large number of literary works depicting Genghis Khan appeared with his image reinterpreted. Representative works include: *The Legend of Genghis Khan* (Sukhbaru, 1984), *The Golden Aristocracy* (Zhang Fenghong, 1986), *Genghis Khan* (Bao Yongqing, 1993), *The Great Legend of Genghis Khan* (Bagan, 1997), *Once Upon a Time in Mongolia* (Ran Ping, 2005), *Grassland God* (Liu Lihua, 2017) and so on. The images of Genghis Khan in contemporary works are often the combination of the hero of the Mongolian nationalities and the sage king advocating Confucian culture, who was tall, brave, wise and kind. Moreover, Genghis Khan's image is more humanized with his own love and hatred. The emotions between he and his wife, his children, his soldiers and even his enemies become more complex.[12]

## 2.3. Image of Genghis Khan in Jin Yong's Martial Arts Novel

In addition to various historical records and novels with the theme of Genghis Khan and the Mongolian steppe, the image of Genghis Khan also appears in other types of literary works. For example, Jin Yong, the master of Chinese new-school martial arts novels, once wrote a short story called *The Family of Genghis Khan*. However, the influence of this short story is far less than that of *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, another martial arts novel with Genghis Khan as the main supporting role. *Legends of the Condor Heroes* takes the growth of the protagonist Guo Jing as the main line, and takes the Southern Song Dynasty's resistance against the invasion of Jin and

Mongols as the historical background, shaping the image of a warrior who serves the country and the people. The author skillfully integrated Guo Jing's growth story into the real historical scenes, making him witness and participate in such historical events as Genghis Khan's unification of Mongolia, crusading Khwarazm, annihilating Jin, and attacking the Song Dynasty. The novel begins in the fifth year of Emperor Ningzong of Song Dynasty (1199) and ends in the year of Genghis Khan's death (1227), describing, with a great length, to readers an image of Genghis Khan different from that of the previous historical books.

Jin Yong's martial arts novels have always been a hot research topic for Chinese scholars. The publication of *Legends of the Condor Heroes (English version)* once again set off a research upsurge in the study of Jin Yong's works. However, there is little research on the image of Genghis Khan in Jin Yong's works. Su Caihong (2010) studied the imperial images in Jin Yong's novels and took Genghis Khan (from *Legends of the Condor Heroes*) and Zhu Yuanzhang (from *Dragon Buster*) as the representatives of founders of the new dynasty, analyzing how they struggled against fate, eliminated their enemies through cruel struggle, and finally established their own independent regime. The author attributed their success to their strong desire for power and outstanding military talent and analyzed their differences in personality and tactic.<sup>[13]</sup> Yu Xiujuan (2021) took the Genghis Khan family in *Legends of the Condor Heroes* as the research object, analyzed and demonstrated the image of Genghis Khan, his sons and the female members in his family respectively.<sup>[14]</sup> It made an conclusion that Genghis Khan in the novel is a hero with instinctive military talent, outstanding statementship, resolute perseverance. With respect to the foregoing, this paper attempts to analyze the text of *Legends of the Condor Heroes* from the perspective of Reader-response criticism, and probe into the image of Genghis Khan in readers' minds.

### 3. Reader-response Criticism of Image of Genghis Khan in Legends of the Condor Heroes

As one of the greatest masters of Chinese new-school martial arts novels, Jin Yong has created many heroes and warriors who devoted themselves for the country and the people, as well as many characters with unique personalities. Jin Yong insisted on the creation of heart-stirring personalized images, and designed the plot of story according to the needs of character development, so as to attract readers' participation at multiple levels and involvement in different degrees. He revealed and explained the personality traits from the behaviors and contradictions of the characters, so that readers can understand and share sorrows and joys with the characters in the novel. Based on Reader-response criticism, this paper aims to interpret the image of Genghis Khan in *Legends of the Condor Heroes* from the theoretical perspectives of Wolfgang Iser's "blank", "indeterminacy" and "disconfirm".

#### 3.1. The Embodiment of "Blank" and "Indeterminacy" in the Text

In the specific literary work, "due to the time sequence and space interval of various internal components (narrator, characters, plot and readers)" in the reading process, the missing link of text components will be formed between one

component and another. This temporary interruption of text coherence is called "blank".<sup>[15]</sup> Iser pointed out that, in the creation of literary works, the writer would leave certain points of blank or indeterminacy, which formed an appealing structure and called for readers' imagination and filling in the gap.<sup>[16]</sup> In *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, such indeterminacies and blanks are presented more than once. For example, in the scene where Genghis Khan appeared for the first time, the author did not reveal his identity directly, but left a "blank" and kept "indeterminate" about his personality, appealing readers to imagine and explore. Genghis Khan first appeared in *Swirling Sand*, the third chapter of the novel. From the view of the protagonist, Guo Jing (then a six-year-old boy), the novel depicted a fierce battle on the Mongolian steppe in which a smaller force beat a larger one. When narrating this battle, Jin Yong left a lot of "blanks", which provided readers with the opportunity to think in the process of reading, and urged readers to continue with the expectation of filling in these "blanks".

*"The Great Khan Temujin has arrived! The Great Khan has arrived!" The fighting continued, but now the soldiers kept looking over in the direction of the horns. A cloud of sand swelled, until through it broke a group of riders. Their cheers grew louder, bolstering the riders' allies and scattering the hitherto tight formations of their foe. A tall, middle-aged man was prominent among the riders. He wore a helmet made of shiny metal and his chin laid growth to a brown tuft of beard. Guo Jing did not know this was the leader of Mongolians, the Great Khan Temujin, later to be known throughout history as the mighty Genghis Khan; he did not even know what the word "khan" meant. But he understood the man's power, and it frightened him. (Chapter 3 Swirling Sands, Vol 1 A Hero Born, p109)[17]*

The description of Temujin's appearing on the scene leaves several mysteries for readers to speculate about. Readers will wonder, like Guo Jing in the novel, what does "Great Khan" mean? Why does his presence concern soldiers on both sides? What is the cause of the battle? Will his arrival change the course and outcome of the battle? The questions are gradually answered in the following part, and the new "blanks" are left by the author. In the next story, the readers see Temujin calmly command and motivate his soldiers to fight bravely. But the author did not allow Temujin to win outright, so as to highlight his outstanding military command skills. Temujin was wounded with an arrow in the neck by a enemy commander in black and fell onto the ground. Temujin's men watched in shock and the enemy were pouring up the hill. Will Temujin be defeated and retreat or will he resist? The reader's curiosity and desire to actively participate in the creation of the story are aroused. When the readers go on, they find Temujin endured the pain, mounted his horse again, and bravely killed three enemy soldiers. Great fears were injected into the hearts of the enemies and Temujin finally led his men to victory in the battle.

The "blank" concerning the outcome of the battle is filled and the image of Genghis Khan as a courageous leader with extraordinary military talents and always taking the lead in dangerous battles is confirmed by the readers. But readers' suspicion about the image of "the general in black" still existed. The general in black was defeated and fled. Temujin offered a reward of 3 jin of gold for his capture. Can he escape?

What is the connection between him, little Guo Jing and Temujin? If caught, what would Temujin do with him? Would he be killed like those resistant as Juwayni or Rashid depicted or be absolved as recorded in *The History of Yuan Dynasty*? For these questions, the author did not give an answer immediately, and this kind of “blank” has formed the characteristic of “indeterminacy”. The story went on and Jebe, the general in black, was captured in front of Guo Jing’s house. To reader’s surprise, Temujin neither killed him immediately as retaliation for his wounds nor did he pardon him outright. Instead, Temujin offered Jebe the opportunity to fight with his general Bogurchi. The novel presents the thrilling and breath-taking jousting scene of the two generals in details while little words were spare on Genghis Khan. However, with only a few words, Genghis Khan’s character of recognizing and treasuring talented people was clearly seen by the readers. Seeing Bogurchi hit by an arrow,

*“Temujin had been watching in distress, but his fears were allayed when he realized Bogurchi was unhurt. He would have exchanged ten thousand sheep, oxen, and horses to keep his best general and friend from being killed.” (Chapter 3 Swirling Sands, Vol 1 A Hero Born, p122)*<sup>[17]</sup>

Jebe was finally defeated by Bogurchi. Temujin, who cherished Jebe’s talent as an impressive archer, spared him, rewarded him with gold and put him in command of a team of ten. Jebe later became a general who followed Genghis Khan and made great contributions. There are two Chinese sayings, “Heroes cherish heroes.” and “A gentleman is ready to die for his bosom friends.” The author did not make any direct description and comment on the character and heroic image of Genghis Khan. Nevertheless, Genghis Khan’s care for Bogurchi and his forgiveness of Jebe undoubtedly help readers reflect on the reasons why he was able to gather talented people from all over the world and achieve his hegemony. According to Iser, under the premise of providing enough information, the more blanks and points of indeterminacy a literary work contains, the more deeply readers will positively participate in the work and explore the potential meaning in it.[18] It can be seen clearly that the “blank” and “indeterminacy” in *Legends of the Condor Heroes* have given readers enough rooms for active reflection and imagination. The author draws readers in through “blank”, providing a free and open space for readers to interpret. In the later reading process, readers can compare their own speculation and existing knowledge with the novel text, thus strengthening the interaction between readers and text.

### 3.2. Embodiment of “Indeterminacy” and “Disconform” of the Heroic Image

It is beyond doubt that one of the most important tasks of martial arts novels is to create heroes with different images and distinct characters. The key word in the novel of “*Legends of Condor Heroes*” is definitely “HERO” and the protagonist Guo Jing is undoubtedly one of the most representative images of hero in Jin Yong’s works. The growing history of hero is certainly one of the important reasons for the novel to attract readers. But what makes a hero? Can Genghis Khan, who has galloped the Mongolian steppe all his life and reached almost all over the world, be worthy of the title “hero”? The characteristics of “indeterminacy” and “disconform” proposed by Iser are reflected in the depiction of Genghis Khan’s image. For Genghis Khan, the purpose of

unifying the Mongolian steppe was certain, which was stated clearly in the novel.

*“My boy, remember what I said to you on that day when we were surrounded by Senggum and Jamuka on the hill.” “Yes, you said we Mongols have many brave men, and, if we were united, we could make all the world’s grasslands ours.” Genghis Khan waved his whip over his head. A sharp crack sounded in agreement. “And now, we Mongols are united, and we will catch Wanyan Honglie.” (Chaper 8 The Army Marches West, Vol. 4 A Heart Divided, p362)*[19]

It was Genghis Khan’s goal to unify the tribes on the steppe so that all Mongols would stop fighting among themselves and unite against foreign enemies. However, in the process of unifying Mongolia, he led his troops to fight against various tribes in numerous fierce battles, claiming many lives on both sides. He even killed his sworn brother, and Jamuka. Isn’t this actually a kind of intra-Mongol fratricide? This bewilderment prevents readers from making sure about his motives for unifying Mongolia, hence resulting in “indeterminacy”, and the readers will begin pondering over the image of Genghis Khan. Is he an ambitious overlord of the grasslands or a cruel slaughterer who would do anything to get what he wanted? Does he deserve the title of “National hero of unified Mongolian steppe”? On the other hand, Genghis Khan’s feelings for Guo Jing and his attitude towards death also make readers’ understanding and evaluation of his image full of “indeterminacy”. Genghis Khan had the loving-kindness for raising Guo Jing up and having faith in him, but he was not irreprouchable on the death of Guo Jing’s mother. He was brave and invincible in all battles. However, staying alone in old age, he could not help thinking:

*“I too am growing old. Will I come back this campaign? ..... Can I escape the clutches of death?” He had always been fearless, indomitable ,a great hero, but the days of waning strength were looming and the thought of death were never far away, bringing a shivering to his heart. (Chapter 8 The Army Marches West, Vol. 4 A Heart Divided, p365)*[19]

So he sent for enlightened eminent Taoists, seeking the means of living forever. Before reading, readers usually form a presupposition on the plot and character image setting based on their previous reading experience. However, the performance of Genghis Khan in the novel undoubtedly goes beyond the readers’ previous reading experience and conflicts with the presupposition of the character image formed before, prompting readers to further speculate and slowly go through the process of “indeterminacy” proposed by Iser. There is no denying that readers are full of veneration and praise towards Genghis Khan’s virtue of outstanding military exploits, rare gifts and bold strategy, cherishing talented people. But as readings go further, the atrocity of killing his sworn brother and massacre over the conquered cities make it hard for readers to avoid the feeling of disgust, hartred and even fear for his ruthlessness and inhumanity. However, the repentance in Genghis Khan’s later years inevitably triggers a kind of compassion and readers will find themselves can’t help feeling empathy for him.

*At length, Genghis Khan breathed a heavy sigh and began to speak. “When Jamuka and I first declared ourselves and, how could I have known that I would have to kill him myself? In a few days’*

*time, I will join him, returning to the yellow earth ... Who has won? Who has lost? What difference does it make, in the end?" ..... "When my anda Jamuka died, our feud was over for him, but not for me — whenever I think of our broken pledge of brotherhood, I am kept awake all night." (Chaper 12 Contest of Mount Hua, Vol. 4 A Heart Divided, p 572-572) [19]*

Therefore, for the image of Genghis Khan, readers have experienced the swing between “positive” and “negative”, forming uncertainty and realizing that they cannot use the traditional “binary opposition” thinking to make a simple comment of “either right or wrong, either good or bad”. Was Genghis Khan be worthy of the title “hero”? Jin Yong posed the question at the end of the novel, but also leaves a “blank” for readers to ponder. At the end of the novel, Genghis Khan is seriously ill and sent for Guo Jing back to Mongolia for the last meeting. They have a discussion over all the heroes past and present:

*Guo Jing considered how he should respond. “No one since time began has come close to the Great Khan’s military prowess, but your might — the might of just one man — was built upon a mountain of white bones and a sea of widows’ and orphans’ tears. .... Since times of old, heroes were looked up to while they lived and admired by those that came after them because they did good deeds for the people and fought to protect them. As I see it, having blood on one’s hands does not make one a hero. .... No one can deny that you have done great things. But, wherever you rode on your conquests, you left a pile of corpses as high as any mountain. Do your achievements outweigh your sins? Do they justify all the blood that has been shed? That is much harder to answer. (Chaper 12 Contest of Mount Hua, Vol. 4 A Heart Divided, p576-577)[19]*

#### 4. Epilogue

Reader-response criticism is a literary theory based on hermeneutic and phenomenological theories. It attempts to study literary works from the perspective of readers’ understanding and acceptance, and realizes the transformation of Western literary theory from author-oriented, text-oriented to reader-oriented. As Trey Eagleton (1987) put it, “Literary works do not lie on bookshelves; they are processes of meaning that can only be realized in the practice of reading. To make literature happen, the reader is just as important as the author.”[20] In the process of writing, the author presupposes “blank”, endows the meaning of the work with certain “undeterminacy”, guides readers to conduct reading, imagination, questioning and interpretation, and realizes the reconstruction of literary works through a series of reactions connecting the vacancy and updating their perspective, so as to recognize and realize the value of the literary work itself. In shaping the image of Genghis Khan in the martial arts novel *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, the author makes the readers participate in the construction of the meaning of the work through “blank” and “indeterminacy” embodied in the text. After repeated rereading and in-depth

thinking, through the experience of “disconfirm” and epiphany, the readers’ understanding of the image of Genghis Khan will be enhanced.

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