

The Identity Alignment of Fictional Historical Figures Against the Background of Ethnic Strife in Jin Yong's Works: A Case Study of Guo Jing

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Abstract. As the saying goes, “Empires arise from chaos and collapse back into chaos.” This notion finds its reflection in ancient China, where issues of identity alignment emerged in tandem with the succession of dynasties. Meanwhile, in recent years, global events such as the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and the Taiwan Question have once again pushed the overarching themes of ethnic strife and identity alignment to the forefront of public discourse. Taking Guo Jing (Guo) as a case study, a pivotal character from Jin Yong's works, as the research subject, this paper explores Jin Yong's perspectives on the identity alignment of historical figures amid the intense ethnic conflicts of the Southern Song Dynasty. It does so by examining Guo's personality, family background, and the key events he experienced. Notably, Jin Yong artfully adapts historical figures and events through his narratives, thereby presenting the issue of identity alignment among the historical figures in his works to readers.

Keywords: Jin Yong, Guo Jing, identity alignment, ethnic conflict

1. Introduction

In the current research on Jin Yong's literary works, ethnic conflict emerges as a core theme that cannot be avoided, as most of his works—both their protagonists and content—are closely tied to ethnic conflict. Among Jin Yong's works, *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* stands out as the most representative example, with its pivotal figure Guo playing a crucial role in embodying this theme. As the protagonist of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Guo has a historical prototype: there was indeed a real historical figure named Guo Jing in history. However, Jin Yong made extensive innovations and adaptations to the image of this real historical figure. In his literary construction, Guo was transformed into a heroic figure with rich descriptions and vivid vitality. In this case, Guo Jing became a highly representative character when studying Jin Yong's works [1].

This paper takes this specific character of Guo Jing as a case study to illustrate Jin Yong's understanding and perspectives on ethnic strife and identity alignment within historical contexts. To supplement background information, this research also incorporates large amounts of historical sources, such as *The History of the Song Dynasty*. Meanwhile, it further draws on existing scholarly works that examine the character of Guo Jing, including the paper that is titled *Exploring the Image*

of Guo Jing in *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* [1]. Finally, this study analyzes the original excerpts from *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* to further highlight the detailed traits of Guo Jing's character and his identity when facing ethnic conflicts [1-3].

2. The historical settings in Jin Yong's works

A large amount of content in Jin's literary works revolves around ethnic strife, and most of this content is set in the Two Song Dynasties (the Northern Song and Southern Song Dynasties). Specifically, his novel *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* is set in the Southern Song Dynasty. In this period, Guo, the main character of the story, embodies numerous contradictions and their underlying causes. A similar example is found in another of Jin's works, *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*, which is set in the Northern Song Dynasty. In this novel, Qiao Feng, its main character, also embodies numerous twists and complexities in his life [4].

During the Southern Song Dynasty, especially after the Jingkang Incident—which was a pivotal event marking the downfall of the Northern Song—ethnic tensions and conflicts became extremely acute. The Jurchens, coming from the northern regions, conquered a large swathe of the northern territory of the Song Dynasty. Key records about this period are recorded in the 22nd and 23rd volumes of the *Benji* (Basic Annals) in *The History of the Song Dynasty* as follows:

On the Jisi day of the first lunar month in the first year of the Jingkang era, Emperor Qinzong of the Song Dynasty proceeded to the Taiqing Palace in Bozhou to conduct a reverent ritual of propitiating and thanking the deities, and then went to Zhenjiang Prefecture. On the Jihai day of the fourth lunar month, he returned to the capital. In the Dingmao day of the second lunar month in the following year, the Jurchens coerced the Emperor into traveling northward. On the Xinmao day of the third lunar month, the Emperor was in Qingcheng. On the Dingyou day, the Jurchens installed Zhang Bangchang as the Emperor of the Chu regime. On the Gengzi day, the Jurchens came to seize people; Xu Bingzhe, the Governor of Kaifeng, ordered the common people to form mutual guarantee groups and prohibited them from hiding anyone. On the Dingsi day, the Jurchens compelled the Retired Emperor into travel northward [2].

These excerpts from *The History of the Song Dynasty* cover key events of the Jingkang Incident, including the Jin army's forced removal of the Two Sacred Emperors to the north. These excerpts not only demonstrate the military strength of the Jin army but also show that such humiliating events significantly intensified ethnic tensions—ultimately pushing the conflicts between the Song and Jin dynasties to a peak [2].

At the same time, the vast Mongol Empire grew increasingly powerful in the north. Its territory expanded all the way to the Middle East and even into Europe, and it was also eyeing the fertile lands of the Southern Song—located in East Asia. The following is an account of the battles between the Mongol Army and the Jin Army as recorded in Volume 1 of the *History of the Yuan Dynasty*.

In the second lunar month, the Emperor (Genghis Khan) personally led his army to march south for conquest. He defeated Ding Xue, a Jin Dynasty general, at Yehu Ridge and captured counties including Dashuiluo and Fengli. The Jin Dynasty then rebuilt Wusha Fortress.

In the seventh lunar month of autumn, the Emperor ordered Zhebie to attack Wusha Fortress and Wuyue Camp, and successfully captured them. In the eighth lunar month, he fought against the Jin army at Huihe River in Xuanping and defeated the Jin army. In the ninth lunar month, he captured Dexing Prefecture; the defending general of Juyong Pass fled, so Zhebie then entered the pass and reached Zhongdu (the Jin capital).

... In this year, all counties and prefectures north of the Yellow River were captured. Only eleven cities—Zhongdu, Tongzhou, Shunzhou, Zhengding Prefecture, Qingzhou, Wozhou, Daming Prefecture, Dongping Prefecture, Dezhou, Pizhou, and Haizhou—remained uncaptured [5].

It is evident that during Temujin's later years, the Mongol Empire had become extraordinarily powerful, enabling it to easily defeat the Jin Army and conquer the entire Hebei region. This undoubtedly further intensified ethnic tensions [5].

According to *On the Early Relationship between the Song Dynasty and the Mongol Empire*, the relationship between the Song Dynasty and the Mongol Empire evolved from a state of joint resistance against the Jin Dynasty to one of mutual confrontation and military conflict. The evolution of their relationship largely determined the rise and fall of the three coexisting regimes at that time: the Song Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty, and the Mongol Empire. These relationships further highlighted the acuteness of ethnic tensions during this period [6].

During this period, the region north of the Huai River had long been occupied by the Jin Dynasty. Historically, however, this region had long been traditional Han territory, and the Han civilians living here had long seen themselves as subjects of the Song Dynasty. After the Song Dynasty was defeated and retreated southward, the northern territories were occupied by the Jin Dynasty. Among the Han people in this northern region, except for those who migrated south with the Song court, the remaining civilians were highly likely to face identity dilemmas. This was because they were of Han ethnic origin yet resided in lands under the jurisdiction of the Jin Dynasty. Consequently, uncertainties regarding their political allegiance—namely whether they belonged to the Jin or the Song Dynasty—triggered a series of issues stemming from their identity conflicts.

To sum up, during the Southern Song Dynasty, the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty occupied a large area north of the Huai River, while the Mongol Empire in the north grew extremely powerful. This historical period was thus characterized by acute ethnic tensions and intense ethnic strife, which provided an excellent historical backdrop for Jin's literary works. As the saying goes, "Adversity fosters great men." It was amid such ethnic strife and inter-state confrontations between regimes that figures like Yue Fei and Han Shizhong were highlighted as ethnic heroes—prominent heroic figures of the time. This historical context also offered an excellent era backdrop for Jin to create the character of Guo.

3. The background setting of Guo Jing in Jin's work

Guo was a real historical figure in Chinese history. His life and deeds are recorded in *The History of the Song Dynasty*, specifically in *Liezhuan (Biographies) Volume 208: Loyal and Righteous Men IV*:

There was a man named Guo, who served as a local militia inspector (*haotu xunjian*) in Gaoqiao. When Wu Xi (Wu) rebelled, the people of the four prefectures refused to submit to the Jin Dynasty. They abandoned their farmlands and houses, helped the elderly and led the children, and fled downstream along the Jialing River. When passing through Da'an Jun (a military administrative region), Yang Zhenzhong distributed grain based on the number of people, so no one in his jurisdiction died of starvation. However, Wu forced all the panicked refugees to return to their original homes, but none of them were willing to go. Guo was among those being driven away; when they reached Baiya Pass, he said to his younger brother Guo Duan: "Our family has been subjects of the Song Dynasty for generations. Since the Jin people invaded the border, my brother and I have not been able to die for our country—we only took refuge in the pass. Now we are expelled by Wu Xi. I cannot bear to abandon the clothing of the Han people (symbol of Song

identity); I am willing to die here and be a ghost loyal to the Zhao clan (royal family of Song).” He then jumped into the river and died [2].

This passage depicts Guo as a righteous man of the Northern Song Dynasty, who was pursued and killed by the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty for resisting its forced order to cut his hair and adopt Jurchen-style clothing. He fled to the riverside, and seeing no way to escape, he chose to drown himself in the river. Before his death, he declared, “I cannot bear to abandon the clothing of the Han people.” Based on this historical account, Jin conducted adaptation and artistic creation of this historical figure [2].

In the novel, Guo’s parents were both of the Song Dynasty and held the ideal of fighting against the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty to defend their homeland. His wife was also of Song origin and strongly supported his commitment to protecting their hometown. Thus, in terms of both family lineage and ethnic origin, Guo was thoroughly a Han Chinese of the Song Dynasty. If he had not had the experience of living in Mongolia, he would not have faced such a significant identity dilemma. Although Guo was of Song ethnic lineage, he was raised in Mongolia from an early age; it can be said that Mongolia was like a second homeland to him. In Mongolia, Genghis Khan (Tiemuzhen) was willing to adopt him as a foster son, consent to marry his daughter to him, and confer on him the title of Golden-Bladed Prince Consort. His mentor, Jebe, was willing to teach him archery, and he also had a sworn brother, Anda Tuo Lei, with whom he grew up. Therefore, his identity was remarkably complex.

In the novel, Guo’s appearance is described as burly in stature, with thick eyebrows and large eyes, and a simple and unadorned demeanor, and these traits convey an impression of integrity and steadfastness. He inherited his tall frame from his father’s Shandong ancestry; his innate square face lent him an upright, simple and honest look; and his early experiences in Mongolia, combined with years of consistent martial arts practice, gave him a swarthy complexion, which further enhanced his masculinity.

The origin of Guo’s name needs to be linked to another major character in the same novel, namely Yang Kang (Yang). As mentioned earlier, the Jingkang Incident intensified ethnic contradictions to an unprecedented degree, and their names reflect this historical context: their fathers met during their escape and agreed to name their sons respectively with “Jing” and “Kang,” so that the boys would always remember the Jingkang Incident and never forget to serve their nation. Although both were given such names with patriotic implications, they took vastly different paths in life. Despite being raised in Mongolia during his early years, Guo never forgot to serve his nation with unwavering loyalty; in contrast, Yang sided with the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty and even aided and abetted the evil forces.

In the novel, Guo possesses mastery of multiple martial arts styles and exhibits extraordinary martial prowess; he is also skilled in horsemanship and archery, which is also reflected in the novel’s title. Meanwhile, Guo is highly adept at commanding troops in battle. He once led the Mongolian army on a western expedition and returned triumphant with a great victory, and this feat is attributed to The Book of Wumu he acquired during his travels. This is a military treatise that records the military strategies, tactics, and ideological insights of Yue Fei (Yue), a renowned historical general. In fact, Guo’s image bears a strong resemblance to that of the historical figure Yue Fei. By endowing Guo with this military ability, Jin essentially establishes a connection between Guo and the national hero Yue, thereby shaping Guo’s heroic persona.

According to The Image of Guo in The Legend of the Condor Heroes, Guo is not only a man of fortitude and courage, honesty and down-to-earth simplicity, tolerance and generosity, and dedication to serving the nation and its people. He is also a simple-minded and somewhat slow-

witted young man, forming a typical yet unique image that combines “simplicity” and “chivalry.” Moreover, he is extremely diligent and never wavers in his conviction to serve his nation. He never backs down in the face of powerful enemies, nor does he abandon his ideals due to his own shortcomings or his nation’s frailty. In the end, through his words and deeds, he embodied and fulfilled his ultimate philosophy: “The greatest chivalry lies in serving the nation and its people” [7].

4. Guo Jing’s growth experiences

As a classic character created by Jin, Guo’s growth experiences across different stages are particularly worthy of attention. During his childhood, to escape the chaos of war, Guo’s mother Li Ping (Li) fled to the northern Mongol territories, where she raised him. Here, Guo grew up healthily alongside the Mongols, who treated him kindly: he was raised with his sworn brother Tuo Lei, who later personally helped him escape back to the Central Plains; Genghis Khan, the Mongol Great Khan, recognized him as a foster son and was willing to entrust him with important responsibilities, appointing him as a marshal to command an army; there was also Hua Zheng, a woman who admired him, and his mentor Jebe, who taught him. During his childhood, Guo’s understanding of his identity leaned more toward Mongolia than the Song Dynasty. Since he could remember, he had never been to the Central Plains. Although his mother often taught him not to forget to serve his nation, Guo had little actual experience of the Song Dynasty—he had never witnessed the cruelty inflicted by the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty on the people of the Song Dynasty with his own eyes, and only learned about it from his mother’s accounts. Under such circumstances, Guo had a vague perception of this motherland he had never seen in person and felt no sense of belonging to it. This state of affairs persisted until the eve of his first trip to the Central Plains.

Guo’s youth was closely tied to the wager between Qiu Chuji and the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan. This was also the direct factor that prompted Guo to travel to the Central Plains for the first time. Guo had a "sworn brother," Yang. Their fathers had agreed to name their sons "Jing" and "Kang" respectively, hoping that the two boys would defend their homeland and protect their nation. Qiu Chuji then made a pact with the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan to each take one boy as a student: Qiu would teach Yang, while the Seven Freaks traveled north to find Guo and instruct him. The Seven Freaks taught Guo in Mongolia for a total of twelve years. During this period, other martial arts masters such as Ma Yu, the abbot of the Quanzhen Sect, also came to teach Guo the internal martial arts of the Quanzhen Sect. This undoubtedly planted a seed of connection to the Central Plains martial arts community and his motherland in Guo’s heart, spurring him to return to the Central Plains.

During his time in the Central Plains, Guo encountered numerous events and setbacks, while also gaining extensive experience and insights. It was during this period that he met Huang Rong (Huang), the great love of his life. As Luo notes, the involvement of female characters plays a crucial role in the protagonist’s growth process, as this can further highlight the qualities and personality traits of Guo’s character [8]. Specifically, when traveling through the Jiangnan region with Huang, Guo met Hong Qigong, the leader of the Beggar Clan, who taught him the “Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms.” Later, when he traveled to Peach Blossom Island, he encountered Zhou Botong (known as Old Urchin Zhou), who instructed him in the “Left-Right Mutual Submission Technique” and tricked him into memorizing the entire Nine Yin Manual. Subsequently, to prevent The Book of Wumu, a legacy of Yue Fei, from falling into the hands of the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty, Guo personally went to retrieve it. Although he succeeded in reclaiming the book, Huang suffered severe injuries in the process. In the end, they managed to find Master Yideng, and Huang was thus saved from death [8].

Subsequently, Guo encountered one of the greatest setbacks of his life: five of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan were killed, and he also had a fierce quarrel with Huang, which eventually led to their separation. Guo then went through events such as the Heroes' Battle at Misty Rain Pavilion and the incident at Wang's Iron Spear Temple. Only after these experiences did he realize he had misunderstood Huang, and he was overwhelmed with remorse. He then searched for Huang alone for nearly half a year.

In fact, Guo's internal stance regarding his identity alignment had gradually leaned toward the Song Dynasty, and this is evident from his refusal to let *The Book of Wumu* fall into the hands of the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty. Meanwhile, during his travels in the Central Plains, he had also witnessed the brutality inflicted by the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty on the Song people. This experience undoubtedly served to further prompt Guo to align himself with the Han people and helped him solidify his sense of identity with the Song Dynasty.

Later, Guo returned to Mongolia and helped the Mongolian army launch a western expedition, during which he assisted in suppressing rebellions and conquering rival states. According to Zang, the early relationship between the Song Dynasty and Mongolia was defined by an alliance to attack and ultimately destroy the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty, and their interaction was generally characterized by an equal cooperative partnership [9]. For this reason, Guo's assistance to the Mongols in their military campaigns was not unjustifiable. However, he soon faced the most critical decision and turning point of his life: Guo's mother learned by chance that Genghis Khan, the Great Khan, intended to march south to conquer the Song Dynasty, forcing Guo to choose between the two sides. At this moment, the issue of Guo's identity alignment reached its climax [9].

In Chapter 38: "Secret Orders in the Silk Pouch" of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* (Revised Edition), Genghis Khan planned to march south to conquer the Song Dynasty once he had destroyed the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty. After Guo and his mother Li learned this, they planned to escape overnight. However, their plan was exposed. To avoid putting Guo in a difficult position and to strengthen his resolve to serve his nation, Li resolutely chose to take her own life. Before her death, she said the following words to Guo:

Recall how I endured humiliation and disgrace back in those days and raised you in the bitter cold lands of the North. What was all that for? Was it really to raise a traitor who betrays his country and make your father grieve bitterly in the afterlife?

A person's life lasts a hundred years, but it passes in the blink of an eye—so what is the big deal about life and death? As long as you act with a clear conscience all your life, you will not have lived in this world for nothing. If someone betrays us, you do not have to hold onto their wrongdoings. Remember my words [1].

Since then, Guo made his choice between two options: receiving a fief and being enfeoffed as a prince in Mongolia or staying in the Song Dynasty to defend his homeland.

During Guo's middle age, he relied on the military strategies he had learned from *The Book of Wumu* and led martial art masters to defend Xiangyang. He repelled Mongolian attacks on multiple occasions. Unfortunately, due to a combination of factors, Mongolia eventually succeeded in capturing Xiangyang. Guo sacrificed his life for his nation alongside his entire family. As Han notes, Guo's character and life perfectly embody the term "great chivalric hero," and his experiences also illustrate the process of transformation in his identity alignment [10]. Starting as a child raised in Mongolia, he evolved into a new chivalric hero in the Central Plains, then became the leader of the martial arts community, and finally sacrificed his life for his nation. This transformation also reflects Jin's understanding of identity alignment [10].

5. Conclusion

The era in which Jin Yong lived also saw a similar scenario as his fiction characters have: the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Since the entire territory of Hong Kong was reduced to a British colony in 1898, it took nearly a century for Hong Kong to return to the embrace of the motherland. Among this period, Hong Kong citizens even went through a generational shift. They were bound to face identity alignment issues during the process of returning to China. Although *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* was written in the 1960s, by artistically adapting historical figures, Jin Yong was able to explore the identity alignment issues of Hong Kong people at that time and present these issues in many of his literary works for readers' reflection.

In conclusion, Jin Yong set up the time era of the Southern Song Dynasty, a period with acute ethnic conflicts, and created a complex background for Guo Jing. Through the numerous events that Guo Jing had experienced, Jin Yong presented to readers the issue of identity alignment of historical figures. However, this paper still contains some of the weaknesses. For instance, it is impossible to assert the idea of identity alignment by using only the example of Guo Jing. Therefore, future study can focus on Jin Yong's other characters and works that also face a similar issue of identity alignment among national and ethnic conflicts, for example, Qiao Feng, to better providing a more comprehensive perspective on such topic, which remains significantly relevant to today's global relationships.

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