

## **800 years on, Genghis Khan still casts long shadow in China**

*Sat Feb 18, 10:56 PM ET*

Sitting astride his horse in a warlike pose, the bronze Genghis Khan in the middle of the Inner Mongolia University campus emits a clear signal.

This is a national hero, a Chinese hero. This is not the mass murderer vilified by generations of Western historians, but the brave founder of the biggest land empire ever.

"Many of us are proud of Genghis Khan," said Wang Youde, a student of forestry science, strolling around the statue.

"It's no small feat to conquer the entire known world all the way to the Danube from horseback."

The 800th anniversary of the founding of Genghis Khan's empire in 1206 will be celebrated this year not just in Mongolia proper but also in Inner Mongolia, historically part of the same culture but now under China's firm control.

Although the great Khan has been dead for nearly eight centuries, his memory is alive and he remains an important political factor in this part of the world.

China's communist government is attempting to co-opt him as a great historical figure transcending ethnic barriers.

"He's become part of the Chinese pantheon of generals and great cultural figures," said Flemming Christiansen, an expert on Chinese politics at Leeds University.

It has been the same story whenever new rulers have taken over in what is now Inner Mongolia, whether Chinese Republicans in the early 20th century, or Japanese imperialists before and during World War II.

All were convinced, probably rightly, that they were better off with Genghis Khan as their ally and tried to harness him for their political purposes.

The Mongolians themselves, now a small minority accounting for about 20 percent of the total population in their own region, are not impressed.

"For the Mongolians, Genghis Khan is a symbol. It's because of him that the Mongolian people exists," said Tengus Bayaryn, an anthropologist at the university.

"The official Chinese view is that Genghis Khan was a Chinese emperor, but Mongolians think he was a Mongolian ruler and had nothing much to do with China," he said.

In Inner Mongolia today, Genghis Khan is a ubiquitous, Che Guevara-style icon, but local affection runs much deeper than that, and an entire religious cult is built around the great founding father.

In officially atheist China, many Mongolian families worship him as a demi-god, setting up regular shrines to him at home.

However, signs are emerging that Genghis Khan's status is declining among younger generations, according to Christopher Atwood, an expert on Inner Mongolia at Indiana University.

"I wouldn't say that Genghis Khan is passe, but my sense is that especially young Mongolians have limited interest in Genghis Khan, because he's been taken over by the Chinese," he said.

A parallel in the west would be the fading allure of Martin Luther King Jr. to African-Americans once he was embraced by white American liberals, he said.

Desperate for other role models, young Mongolians now prefer to celebrate the likes of Gada Meiren, a rebel leader of the early 20th century, especially in their songs.

Gada Meiren is tolerated by the Chinese government, but only because he can be conveniently depicted as a rebel against feudal oppression, not against the Chinese or the Communists.

In between youthful indifference and government attempts to usurp Genghis Khan, modern Mongolian scholars are left to try and figure out what the legacy of the great warrior actually is.

For Bayaryn, it is important to salvage Genghis Khan from his reputation as just a fierce, hardly civilized warrior chieftain.

He has uncovered documents which he claims are evidence that he was actually literate -- even if the Mongolian writing system was only invented when he was at a mature age, as many find plausible.

Given the straightforward, phonetic Mongolian writing that existed at the time, it would not have been too difficult, Bayaryn argued.

"It would have taken an average adult two months to learn written Mongolian, while a relatively intelligent person would be able to do it in one month. And Genghis Khan was intelligent," he said.

"If it's accepted that he was indeed literate, it will change our perception of him as simply an uncivilized mass murderer."

Even if he could not read and write, Genghis Khan was much more than a military man, according to Baladugqi, an ethnic Mongolian and a professor at the Inner Mongolia Modern History Research Institute.

"Only under Genghis Khan and his successors was the Silk Road under one political authority. You could transport a product all the way from Beijing to Moscow and sell it there," he said.

"Political, economic, social, cultural and religious exchanges thrived on a scale never seen before."

For Baladugqi, it is an undeniable fact that Genghis Khan founded his empire on raw power, but if his skills had been only military he would never have been able to create a world empire.

"Genghis Khan was open-minded and not at all conservative. He adjusted his rule to local conditions," he said. "Mongolians have a very open mind, and it could be because they are used to the wide-open steppes."