

Routledge Studies in Chinese Comparative Literature and Culture

THE TRANSCULTURATION OF JUDGE DEE STORIES

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Yan WEI



The Transculturation of Judge Dee Stories

This book views the Dutch sinologist Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries as a hybrid East–West form of detective fiction and uses the concept of transculturation to discuss their hybrid nature with respect to their sources, production, and influence.

The Judge Dee mysteries authored by Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) were the first detective stories to be set in ancient China. These hybrid narratives combine Chinese historical figures, traditional Chinese crime literature, and Chinese history and material culture with ratiocinative methods and psychoanalytic themes familiar from Western detective fiction. This new subject and detective image won a global readership, and the book discusses the innovations that van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries brought to both Chinese *gong'an* literature and Western detective fiction. Furthermore, it introduces contemporary writers from different countries who specialize in writing detective fiction or *gong'an* novels set in ancient China.

The book will meet the interest of fans of Judge Dee stories throughout the world and will also appeal to both students and researchers of comparative literature, Chinese literature, and crime novels studies.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Hybridity in the English Translation <i>Dee Goong An</i>	27
2 Tradition and Innovation in Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee Mysteries	46
3 Judge Dee Goes Home: Chinese Translations of Judge Dee Mysteries and New Stories of Judge Dee	81
Epilogue: Detective Fiction in Ancient Chinese Settings after Judge Dee	95
<i>Bibliography</i>	113
<i>Index</i>	120

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Introduction

The Judge Dee mysteries authored by the Dutch diplomat, sinologist, and popular novelist Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) blazed a trail for writers of detective fiction set in ancient China. Van Gulik's tales were the first detective stories to be set in ancient China. These hybrid narratives combine Chinese historical figures, traditional Chinese crime literature (*gong'an* 公案), and Chinese history and material culture with ratiocinative methods and psychoanalytic themes familiar from Western detective fiction. The combination of an unfamiliar setting and a new type of detective won a global readership for van Gulik's work and introduced innovations in both Western detective fiction and traditional *gong'an* literature. On the one hand, Western readers feel that Judge Dee stories are fresh because they differ in so many respects from their own culture, including the administration of justice, religious beliefs, social customs, and material culture. On the other hand, Chinese readers experience cultural nostalgia because details of traditional Chinese life are vividly and realistically presented. They are pleased that Judge Dee is portrayed as a positive image of a Chinese—wise, brave, and intelligent. However, for a long time, many Chinese readers did not realize that the creator of the Judge Dee detective stories was actually from the West.

Judge Dee was a real historical figure of the seventh century CE, but the detective stories that feature him are completely fictional. According to historical records, Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700) was an effective administrator known for his concern for the welfare of the people,¹ his diplomatic achievements,² and his outspokenness in the court of Empress Wu. In particular, Di Renjie is praised for his loyalty to the Li House, which founded the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Its rule was briefly interrupted by Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), the only empress in Chinese history to rule in her own name. She seized the throne from her son in 690 and established the Zhou Dynasty (690–705). During the earlier part of the seventh century, Di Renjie held a number of positions under four Tang emperors. In the Zhou period, he served as chancellor during the reign of Empress Wu and won her trust. Di promoted Tang loyalists to the court and succeeded in persuading the empress to install her son Li Xian 李顯 (656–710) as the crown prince. Di died at the age of 71, when Empress Wu was still in power. After Wu fell seriously ill in 705, Tang loyalists forced her to abdicate in favor of Li Xian, who

2 Introduction

proclaimed himself Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang Dynasty in March 705. His successor Emperor Ruizong posthumously conferred on Di Renjie the title of Duke of Liang. For this reason, Di Renjie is also known by the honorific Di Lianggong.

Although Di Renjie's career in general is well documented, his talent for detection is mentioned only once in the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (The Old History of the Tang Dynasty), compiled in the tenth century: "When Di Renjie served as the secretary general at the Supreme Court in 676, he solved in one year a great number of cases, involving 17,000 individuals in total, without a single unjust verdict."³ This note remained the only reference to Di's reputation as a detective until the late Qing period, when a Chinese *gong'an* novel entitled *Wu Zetian sida qi'an* 武則天四大奇案 (Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu) appeared.

Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu is a 64-chapter *gong'an* novel of unknown authorship. Van Gulik read this novel during the Second World War, when he, as a Dutch diplomat, was forced to leave Japan in 1942. In 1945, when he was sent to Washington, DC, as the counselor at the Dutch embassy, van Gulik started to translate the first 30 chapters of this novel into English under the title *Dee Goong An: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee*. From 1948 to 1951, van Gulik was transferred to Japan again as an adviser to the Netherlands Military Mission in Kyoto. When he found out that "the book market was flooded by third-rate crime-novels about Chicago and New York by younger Japanese writers,"⁴ he assumed the financial risk of printing 1,200 copies of his translation of *Dee Goong An* to prove to Chinese and Japanese authors "how much excellent material there was in ancient Chinese crime literature."⁵ This effort was so successful that all the copies were sold within six months.⁶ In 1975, Dover Publications in New York reprinted this English translation under a new title, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee: An Authentic Eighteenth-Century Chinese Detective Novel*.

Although van Gulik's English translation of *Dee Goong An* was well received by readers, it failed to inspire either Chinese or Japanese writers to create their own judge-as-detective stories because "[the] subject was not sufficiently 'exotic' to them."⁷ Therefore, van Gulik decided to write a few mysteries that could be translated into Chinese and Japanese and used as models. Adhering to the setting of *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik placed Judge Dee's early career in the reign of Emperor Gaozong (649–683) of the Tang Dynasty. By 1967, he had produced 14 novels and 8 short stories featuring the judge. Judge Dee thus became one of the most famous Chinese detectives in the West. Not only were the literary achievements of the Judge Dee mysteries recognized by van Gulik's fellow Western writers, but they also achieved commercial success, and Judge Dee continues to be a popular figure in Western media. In addition to inspiring several TV dramas and film adaptations in the West, Judge Dee is the subject of many websites and works of fan fiction.⁸

In the 1980s, Judge Dee returned to China through Chinese translations of van Gulik's detective stories. Chinese translators imitated the style of late Ming/Qing vernacular novels, leading many Chinese readers to mistake the translations for original Chinese detective stories. The first series of new

Judge Dee tales, written and directed by Qian Yanqiu 錢雁秋 (1968–), was broadcast on television in 2004 and received a warm reception. Since then, more Chinese TV series and films about Judge Dee have been produced with storylines independent of van Gulik's series.

This book views van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries as a hybrid East–West form of detective fiction and uses the concept of transculturation to discuss their hybrid nature with respect to their sources, production, and influence. The word “transculturation” was coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) in 1940 to refer to the process “through which multiple cultures produce hybrid cultural elements that cannot be traced to a single originating culture.”⁹ These elements include “symbols, linguistic forms, genres, artifacts, and other forms of communication.”¹⁰ This book applies the lens of transculturation to literary genre studies and argues that transculturation is the essential characteristic of van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries. This process is already apparent in van Gulik's English translation *Dee Goong An*, which provided the template for his later stories, but *Dee Goong An* is already a selective adaptation instead of a faithful translation of the original Chinese *gong'an* novel *Four Strange Cases*. Van Gulik altered his source text in order to bring his translation closer to the Western detective fiction tradition and satisfy Western readers. His Judge Dee mysteries continue this hybrid practice. Drawing on his erudition in sinology, van Gulik filled his Judge Dee mysteries with authentic details about Chinese traditional life, but he also projected an idealized ancient China ruled by cultivated Chinese literati like Judge Dee. Van Gulik's aim was to create a new type of detective fiction that draws on the strengths of both Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese *gong'an* literature. His hybrid experiment resulted in a new territory for writers of detective fiction to explore: ancient China. Van Gulik's success encouraged more writers to take on this subject. Incorporating new elements from espionage fiction, martial arts stories, and even American thrillers and video games, writers have produced a large number of stories that are set in different dynasties. Moreover, this body of detective fiction represents a wide range of political ideologies and cultural concerns regarding China and its relationship with neighboring countries, which further complicates the process of transculturation in the case of the production of Judge Dee stories.

This introduction will first compare van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries with both Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese *gong'an* literature to distinguish them from both genres. After introducing van Gulik as a transcultural writer, I consider the concepts of orientalism, chinoiserie, the variation theory of literary dissemination, and transculturation in order to explain why “transculturation” best captures the nature of his Judge Dee stories. Finally, I briefly describe the structure of this book.

Judge Dee Mysteries and Western Detective Fiction

In the West, detective fiction emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The development of the modern police force, forensic science, and technology

4 Introduction

contributed to the birth of this modern literary genre.¹¹ Classic detective fiction and hard-boiled fiction are two of the most popular types. The classic type, also called “whodunit” stories, emphasizes intelligence and puzzle-solving and insists on the principle of fair play between author and reader; namely, the reader, like the detective, is in possession of all the clues necessary to solve the mystery. Hard-boiled fiction, on the other hand, often aims to reveal society’s ills and the bureaucratic corruption caused by the global expansion of capitalism. Although van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries were produced in the 1960s, when hard-boiled fiction was more popular, they belong to the whodunit type and adhere to the aesthetic of classic detective fiction.

The Dutch diplomat and sinologist van Gulik became a detective fiction writer by chance. In the 1940s, to practice his Chinese, he translated half of a traditional Chinese *gong’an* novel, *Four Strange Cases*, under the title *Dee Goong An*. Soon he decided that the quality of this traditional Chinese novel was much better than that of the Western detective paperbacks sold in the drugstore near his residence in Washington, DC.¹² He was also disappointed with the translations of third-rate Western thrillers he saw in Japan. Hence, van Gulik decided to publish his English translation of *Dee Goong An* to reveal the excellent material to be found in traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature.

Van Gulik never stated outright the specific qualities of Chinese *gong’an* literature that, in his opinion, made it better than many Western thrillers. The “Translator’s Preface” to his English rendering of *Dee Goong An* may give us clues. Looking back at the history of detective fiction, van Gulik observed, “The mysteries of China itself or of the Chinatowns in some foreign cities, were often chosen as a means of lending a weird and exotic atmosphere to the plot,” and for this reason “the Chinese have been so often represented – and too often misrepresented! – in our popular crime literature.”¹³ Through introducing genuine Chinese *gong’an* literature to Western readers, van Gulik wished not only to make them aware of the long tradition of Chinese crime literature but also to correct the distorted impression of the Chinese and China in Western detective fiction.¹⁴

Detective stories set in the distant Tang Dynasty of China might put off some Western readers, but cultural exoticism itself can sometimes be a selling point, especially when the author of such stories is a trustworthy sinologist. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries not only expanded the geographic and historic landscape in classic detective fiction but also have attracted a wide readership who may not read detective fiction but want to learn about the history and customs of ancient China.¹⁵ Agatha Christie (1890–1976), for example, enjoyed *The Chinese Maze Murders* and considered it to have “a rare charm and freshness.”¹⁶ Arthur P. Yin, an overseas Chinese who wrote a preface for Janwillem van De Wetering’s biography *Robert van Gulik: His Life, His Work* (1987), proposed that the series appeals to readers who have no Chinese cultural roots because “they convincingly set before the reader a world that has

now vanished, or at the least been overlain. And they do so in a form which is popular and accessible.”¹⁷ The famous sinologist Wilt Idema (1944–) admitted to being a fan of the Judge Dee stories in his high school years in the Netherlands. Before he entered college, his entire knowledge of China was derived from the novels of van Gulik and Pearl Buck.¹⁸ At one point, van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories were even listed as compulsory reading for American diplomats as an elementary introduction to Chinese life.¹⁹

Before Judge Dee made his first appearance, images of Chinese in Western detective fiction were generally negative. When Chinese characters appeared, they were frequently described as wearing a pigtail (queue) and were often associated with opium-smoking in a crime-ridden Chinatown. Setting out the rules of classic detective fiction in 1929, Ronald Knox joked that Chinese characters were not allowed because readers would immediately regard them as villains and therefore the principle of fair play between reader and writer would be violated.²⁰ The best-known example of the maligning of Chinese is the super-villain Dr. Fu Manchu. Created by the British novelist Sax Rohmer (1883–1959), Fu headed a criminal gang in London’s Chinatown and, with his plans to rule the Western civilized world through mobs from the Orient, represented the “Yellow Peril.”

A striking exception in the portrayal of Chinese in crime fiction is the super-detective Charlie Chan. This character was created in 1925 by the American detective novelist Earl Derr Biggers (1884–1933), who set out to construct the image of a model Chinese American. Biggers wrote six Charlie Chan novels himself, and the character was so popular that nearly 50 films featuring the detective were produced. Despite Charlie Chan’s humor and intelligence, however, the reception of this character has been polarized. Many Asian Americans do not like this figure and consider him a stock Chinese who speaks broken English and is always quoting from Confucius.²¹

Van Gulik’s Judge Dee is distinguished from Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. In the postscript to one of his novels, van Gulik continues to correct popular anachronisms in the presentation of Chinese in Western popular culture. “Note that at that time the Chinese did not smoke, neither tobacco nor opium,” he writes, “and did not wear the pigtail — which was imposed on them only after A.D. 1644 by the Manchu conquerors.”²² Unlike the threatening figure of Dr. Fu Manchu, Judge Dee does not cause a Western audience to feel intimidated because of his temporally distant setting in the seventh-century Tang Dynasty. Like most Chinese at that time, Judge Dee still considers China to be the center of the world and looks down on its neighbors as barbarians. He is not yet aware of the existence of Western civilization. Unlike Charlie Chan, who is viewed unfavorably by many Chinese readers, van Gulik’s Judge Dee has been warmly received by both anglophone and Chinese readers. Chinese readers are proud that these stories advertise their rich material culture and portray an ideal Chinese detective who is rational and intelligent. Arthur P. Yin, who grew up in China and emigrated

6 Introduction

to the United States at the age of 11, expressed the feelings of cultural nostalgia he experienced when he read the Judge Dee mysteries in middle age:

And here, in plain English, was all my Chinese past, personal and literary, once more evoked. The old Chinese locutions: “this insignificant person”; the food; the oily onion cake and jugs of wine that Ma Joong and Chiao Tai enjoy; the traditional Confucian enemies of literature; the nefarious meat-eating Buddhist monks. And these mysteries, particularly the earlier ones, not only followed the traditional forms but displayed the social sensibilities peculiar to the China of feudal times.²³

As his title implies, Judge Dee is distinguished from Western literary detectives by his place in the juridical system in Tang China. First, unlike Western detectives, who are usually responsible only for the investigation, Judge Dee, as a local magistrate, takes on multiple roles as detective, inspector, and judge. Van Gulik explains this Chinese administrative custom to Western readers:

This novel clearly shows the comprehensive duties of the magistrate in his quality as presiding judge of the district tribunal. Crimes are reported directly to him, it is he who is expected to collect and sift all evidence, find the criminal, arrest him, make him confess, sentence him, and finally administer to him the punishment for his crime.²⁴

Second, in the Chinese system, the judge usually relies on several trusted assistants to investigate cases, interview witnesses, provide consultation, and extract confessions. They are usually selected early in the judge’s career and follow him to different posts until he retires. Some of these assistants are former highwaymen and outlaws who have sworn loyalty to the judge. Van Gulik borrowed the figures of four lieutenants of Judge Dee from *Four Strange Cases* but elaborated on their personalities and their past according to his own fancy. The size and dynamics of Judge Dee’s detective team—“an evolving community” with complementary personalities, as Van Dover calls it²⁵—also distinguish the tales from the classic Western detective fiction tradition, which usually pairs its detective heroes with a sidekick, as in the case of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Third, Judge Dee always solves three cases simultaneously. Van Gulik borrowed this structure from *Four Strange Cases*, believing that such multitasking is realistic and could be a useful addition to Western detective fiction. He writes,

In one respect this novel introduces a new literary device that, as far as I know, has not yet been utilized in our popular crime literature, *viz.* that the detective is engaged simultaneously on three different cases, entirely independent of each other, each with its own background and dramatic personæ.²⁶