

Book Reviews

The Transculturation of Judge Dee Stories: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. By Yan Wei. London: Routledge, 2022. 128 pages. ISBN 9781032314150.

This slim volume (introduction, three chapters, and an epilogue) proposes to apply a new approach—“transculturation”—to the study of the Judge Dee stories written by Robert van Gulik in the 1950s and 1960s.

Judge Dee, a character based very loosely on the historical Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700), first appeared in English in the 1940s, when van Gulik published a partial translation of a nineteenth-century novel under the title *Dee Goong An: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee* (1951). This was followed by a series of fourteen novels and eight short stories, some of which borrowed their plots from other Chinese court case fiction, which flourished in the late Ming dynasty, while others were van Gulik’s own creations. All of these stories reveal hybrid features, being a cross between Chinese court case fiction and Anglo-American detective fiction.

Wei’s first chapter is devoted to *Dee Goong An* as a hybrid text. Yet the background to van Gulik’s translation and its hybrid nature is well known, as van Gulik himself outlines the salient features of both traditions in his introduction to *Dee Goong An*; other academics, perhaps most recently Van Dover (2015), have also discussed this feature at length. Therefore, I must say that I was somewhat underwhelmed by the way in which Wei applies the concept of “transcultural” in this study as, in the end, I was not convinced that there was much new to be learned. This may partly be set down to a lack of in-depth analysis by Wei, and partly due to problems with the concept of “transcultural” itself.

To take the second issue first, Wei claims to be drawing mainly on Thornber (2009) and Dagnino (2015) for the concept of “transculturalism.” A major part of these transcultural studies is that they propose an alternative to postcolonial readings of texts produced when cultures interact in an arena of unequal power relations (Dagnino 2015; Thornber 2009). Wei claims that this does not apply to van Gulik, who instead was “satisfied with his job as a European diplomat in the modern world

and dreamed of becoming a traditional Chinese civil servant through the creation of the fictional world of Judge Dee,” (18) as if the temporal dislocation obviated any need to discuss power relations between the Dutch, Chinese, and Japanese during and after World War II.

Both Thornber (2009, 11) and especially Dagnino (2015, 4–18) go to great lengths to try to distinguish transcultural studies from a host of near-synonyms (“cross-cultural,” “intercultural,” “multicultural,” “cosmopolitan,” and “diasporic”) as well as cognate areas of cultural studies, such as influence studies in comparative literature, postcolonialism, and orientalism. For the “cultural” terms, this attempt succeeds mainly by insisting that cross-cultural, intercultural, multicultural, et cetera, all rest firmly on the ground of stable, separate cultures; transcultural studies are supposed to completely overcome the belief in national cultures as separate, stable entities (Dagnino 2015).

Yet Wei emphasizes again and again that there are two distinct traditions of crime fiction, the Chinese and the Anglo-American. This very emphasis on two “traditions” (which I translated in my head into “cultures”) seems to belie the basic premise of transcultural studies—that there is no such thing as a stable, distinct culture. Since Wei also ignores the issue of power differentials, I do not see how Wei’s “transcultural” study differs from earlier “intercultural” or “cross-cultural” studies, or even comparative culture studies.

The second chapter treats how tradition and innovation are mixed together in the novels that van Gulik wrote after the initial publication of his translation *Dee Goong An*. Here again, I found the analysis lacking in freshness. The division of van Gulik’s production into three phases is not original to Wei, being taken from Van Dover (2015). The shift from the first phase, wherein the first five novels are set in a definite internal chronological order, to the second phase, where the stories are inserted here and there into the earlier timeframe, harks directly back to the Sherlock Holmes stories, wherein Doyle also begins with a definite chronology and then shifts to simply setting the stories some time in Holmes’s career. This was a phenomenon that I had described as a shift from a historical to a mythical figure (St. André 1998). The conclusion regarding chinoiserie as an allegory for transculturation is rather weak, and I cannot really see how transcultural is better than orientalism to understand the Judge Dee novels.

Other than the concept of transculturation, the main innovation in this study is to look at the legacy that van Gulik's stories have left in both the English and the Chinese cultural spheres, extending up to the present. This is the topic of the third chapter and the epilogue. To me, this was the most interesting part of the book, as it deals with later imitations and extensions (or "fan fiction") first in English, French, and then even in Chinese. Wei deals with both fiction and later film and television adaptations of the figure of Judge Dee, arguing persuasively that even the Chinese adaptations owe something to van Gulik. Having watched one of the films myself (*Detective Dee*, directed by Tsui Hark), I was convinced at least in this case that the concept of transcultural might be appropriate.

All in all, *The Transculturation of Judge Dee Stories* is a mixed bag, with most of the interesting insights on the later material, whereas the analysis of the van Gulik translation and stories does not break significant new ground.

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