

From Gong'an Magistrate to Oriental Detective: An AI-Assisted Corpus Study of the Reconstruction of Judge Dee's Image

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Abstract:

Cross-cultural translation is not merely a process of lexical transfer. Instead, it is a complex act of cultural reproduction shaped by literary norms, publishing practices, and multiple stakeholders. In Robert van Gulik's English translation *Dee Goong An* (狄公案), the original text is introduced to a Western readership, while his subsequent literary recreations, the *Judge Dee Mysteries* series, further develop it into a new body of work through creative rewriting and adaptation. Across these stages, the historical figure of Di Renjie is reconfigured as an "Oriental detective" aligned with Western genre conventions, rather than his original image as a righteous magistrate. Over time, this reimagined figure has circulated globally and has returned to the Chinese-speaking world through translation, raising important questions about how translation and rewriting contribute to the reconstruction of a literary character's images.

Previous scholarship has examined van Gulik's works from perspectives such as cultural hybridity, narrative reconstruction, and translation strategies. Those studies have highlighted the fusion of Chinese gong'an traditions with Anglo-American detective fiction and have characterized van Gulik's approach as a form of "creative treason," involving selective additions, omissions, and transformations. However, such research has tended to prioritize textual or narratological analysis, with less attention to systematic, data-driven approaches that can reveal broader patterns of transformation across texts.

To address this gap, this study employs an AI-assisted, corpus-based methodology. NotebookLM is employed as a preprocessing tool to align sentences between van Gulik's English originals and their Chinese translations, after which the aligned data are imported into Sketch Engine to build a parallel corpus for analysis. This makes it possible to a more systematic examination of translational shifts and discursive transformations across different stages in the reconstruction of Di Renjie's image as it has re-entered the target cultural context.

The analysis is further grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Lacan's Borromean knot, which links the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, and André Lefevere's theory of rewriting and manipulation. The study focuses on *Dee Goong An*, the *Judge Dee Mysteries* series, and their Chinese translations by Zhang Ling, examining how the portrayal of Di Renjie is reconfigured across linguistic, cultural, and ideological dimensions.

By examining the image reconstruction of Di Renjie across languages and contexts, this study attempts to show how translation and adaptation participate in the ongoing reshaping of literary figures and their meanings. The findings contribute to a more integrated understanding of cross-cultural rewriting through the incorporation of AI-assisted corpus methodologies and offer further insight into the role of translation in the global circulation of literature.

Keywords: Judge Dee, image reconstruction, AI-assisted corpus study, Borromean knot