

## A Study on the Space Images of “The Chinese Gold Murders”

Zhengyang Liu<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Literature, Liaoning University, Shenyang, China

\*Corresponding author: dmandff@tzc.edu.cn

### Abstract:

As one of the works in *A Judge Dee Mystery* written by Robert Van Gulik, *The Chinese Gold Murders* contains many space images with multi-cultural elements to be researched. In Chinese Professor Cao Shunqing's theory, Imagology of Comparative Literature in The Variation of Comparative Literature, Ideology and Utopia are two cross-cultural literary concepts that can be used to illustrate them. So, combining the texts and the theory, it is obvious to see changes and constants in space images. They both reflect the relationship between Chinese original space images and the method of how the author and his domestic literary culture handle them. The reason why they happen is misreading, which originates from the differences between Eastern and Western literary traditions. However, Utopia in this work does show some new inspirations compared to Cao's elucidation, which can be seen as a supplement. Ideology and Utopia can serve as the basis and reminder for further advancement of Imagology of Comparative Literature.

**Keywords:** Cross-culture; Image Study; Misreading

### 1. Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Van Gulik accomplishes *A Judge Dee Mystery*, according to the Chinese book (*Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*) translated by himself. The series of twenty-four books include space images which include many multi-cultural circumstances and reasons to be examined. Rooted from the above-mentioned background, there is a research perspective can be taken into consideration, The theory of Imagology of Comparative Literature in The Variation of Comparative Literature. It is proposed by a Chinese professor Cao Shunqing. It sprouts from his book *The Study of Comparative Literature* and matures in *The Variation Theory of Comparative Theory* [1,2]. The standpoint of this article chiefly refers to the theory. It is initially based on the discovery about how the foreigners gaze and handle the exotic literary images which contains character figures, national figures in their own sights. However, it is always mixed with many tough issues concerned about complex elaborations of milieu such as the concept *Social Collective Imagine* that Daniel-Henri Pageaux proffers. After a period of stagnation, Cao arranges these ideas and provides his thought with the researchers. He mainly cites two words *Ideology* and *Utopia*, which pinpoint two kinds of space images situated in the Western and non-western sights respectively and takes *Misreading* as the key factor to expound why it happens. He not only facilitates such a blurry theory to be more clearly expressed, but also prompts a explanatory

horizon as a solution to answer what the prime mover is. Therefore, as a work which is written by an author with multi-cultural and experience in ancient Chinese novel reading, *A Judge Dee Mystery* is able to suit this frame. However, there are not many theses utilizing such a theoretical tool to unpack space images of *A Judge Dee Mystery*. A paper called *Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination: The Image of China and Dee Goong An (Di Gong An)* written by Siyu Chen is connected with this issue [3]. The author captures two important causes which belong to Cao's theory: the western Chinese images and the process of text spread then taking *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* with *A Judge Dee Mystery* as examples to develop ideas. It brings an inspiration for the following writers although lacking some discuss in space images. So, because of the scarcity of papers and insufficiency in the study to space images, this article is devoted to fulfill the task to illustrate.

As part of the series, *The Chinese Gold Murders* can be a major object to focus on. Based on such a novel, this article aims to pick two conceptions of the theory, *Ideology* and *Utopia*, to observe two kinds of space images, accompanying *Misreading* as the core factor which induces them, inspecting to what extent literature plays a role in cross-cultural communication.

By doing such research, it is obvious that not only more concealed details which embody the deep layer of comparison between Western and Eastern are able to be excavated, but also an attempt which manifests the possibility

to employ Chinese scholar's independent insight to make the study of comparative literature in an open atmosphere is exerted.

## 2. Ideology and Utopia: Two kinds of space images

Ideology and Utopia are two crucial notions to clarify the space images in *The Chinese Gold Murders*. The pair of terms is originally created by Karl Mannheim, which produces two thinking patterns of society: skeptical of opponents and inconsistent with reality [4]. Then, Paul Ricoeur ascribes it to Social Collective Imagination with the impulsion of authority to legalize itself and the function of overturning [5]. In addition, Jean-Marc Moura develops it as a complete literary theory. He deems Ideology caters to the national readers' need to integrate and simplify their understandings of exotic people, and Utopia serves to amplify the singularity deviating from one's own cultural beliefs. Based on these, Cao Shunqing gives his opinion that both two are variations of Social Collective Imagination. However, Ideology refers to exotic space images fabricated by foreigners' domestic social value to mould other countries in their own sights, and Utopia is adopted to define another type of exotic space images made by the same group without the foreigner's own sights.

### 2.1 Peng-lai as Ideology

Retrospecting the tradition of ancient Chinese literary, Peng-lai is a famous wonderland [6]. It is always mentioned as a hazy and tranquil space image that denotes longevity, freedom and happiness in myths of many Pre-Qin Dynasty books such as *the Classic of Mountains and Rivers* and *Zhuang Zi*. In the Han to Tang Dynasty, it is still used as a space image, which almost keeps its previous description and meaning in poetry. Besides, its features do not change in novels. For instance, in an ancient Chinese novel, *Flowers in the Mirror*, Peng-lai is written as a mysterious and charming space image in Chapter One, where the fairy shows up and immortal trees are planted [7]. It is evident that in ancient Chinese cultural literary context, Peng-lai is equivalent to a space image which points to paradise.

However, in Robert Van Gulik's narration, Peng-lai varies [8]. It becomes a dangerous place, which can even be seen as a metaphor or scene hinting at the evil. In Chapter One, it is depicted in Secretary Liang's words, which warn Judge Dee not enter. The author uses a large space to add many details such as mist and rain, the dead's resurrection from graves, and a story telling that a fierce tiger, who lingers to eat people, exists in Peng-lai.

It is apparent that Peng-lai here differentiates from the original record. The style is totally dark, not in a conven-

tional auspicious colour. In the text, a keyword *dismal* occupies the kernel. Under its domination, the words about the weather and the horrible folklore are able to attach. Besides, it really takes effort to build up a main scene for Judge Dee's detective story to reveal.

Next, Peng-lai is shaped as a transit port where Japanese and Korean merchants gather. The low walls, gatehouse and river are adjacent to Peng-lai. The fort next to the river mouth is set in order to inspect the shipping traffic. It is due to the war between Qing Dynasty and Korea, Peng-lai becomes a vital harbour where the non-Chinese settle.

This narrative turns Peng-lai into a location set for escaping the war between Korea and the Tang Dynasty and for commercial purposes in Chapter Three. It is undeniable that the author wields his writing strategy to make such a space image more peculiar than its previous look. Peng-lai is arranged to serve the trade in two East Asian countries, and many Korean with occupations stay here, which makes such a space image as an ancient Chinese literary token almost connected with the Korean Peninsula in the westerner's detective novels for the first time.

Above all, Peng-lai is a space image that shows Ideology. Compared with its intrinsic feature, it is deprived of positive mythic morals to be a sinister place, which suggests the theme of the novel, the *conspiracy and peril* Judge Dee encounters. What is more, the mixture of history and fantasy in East Asia is also a new perspective to overwrite the *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*. It is precisely under the influence of the foreigners' domestic sight to decide how to write Peng-lai, this space image can be such a different kind.

### 2.2 Country Government, Old Temple as Utopia

Unlike Peng-lai, which performs the characteristic of Ideology, there are two exotic space images that can be seen as Utopia, meaning that they are both written in an orthodox Chinese literary cultural habit, not in foreigner's own illusion.

In Chapter Three of *The Chinese Gold Murders*, when Judge Dee comes into Country Government, it is shown by the exposure of many ancient Chinese style things, including a high bench with red brocade on the back, a wall covered with silk and a unicorn putting on the table.

From these descriptions, a non-western space image is constructed. It is not similar to the Western office in many aspects. Two kinds of materials in decoration that represent Chinese traditional style are shown. Next, the unicorn almost only occurs in Chinese judicial culture. It may be Xie Zhi that represents justice, because the author affixes the adjective *perspicacity* to it, and in ancient Chinese judicial culture, the unicorn, which has the meaning of

being acute, is solely it. These details are absolutely written by the author's acceptance of Chinese literary cultural sight.

Old Temple (White Cloud Temple) is also an unforgettable space image that is appropriate in Utopia. In Chapter Eleven of the same book, a classical ancient Chinese harmonious environment arises. The author portrays a leisure and comfortable natural world which encloses the temple. However, it is the foreshadowing of the abbot's quarters. It is a place where the ebony couch with silk cushion, two abstinent monks, a wall with brochure and Buddhist picture and fragrant incense exist.

It is noticeable that the space image is rooted in several Chinese things that reflect the sight out of the non-Western literary cultural convention. From the natural sight, a classic Chinese idyllic picture is drawn out. If recognizing it from a holistic synthesis view, the author's emotional attitude is obvious. He puts the marble gates, a spring where the founder of the temple finds the statue of Lord Maitreya and a canyon in spatial order. Space images like this are very common in ancient Chinese literature. Furthermore, the same material, *silk* and *brochure*, recur as they emerge in the Country Government, being seized to take the function of decoration, which emphasizes the uniqueness of ancient Chinese culture again. Then, the humans are selected to be added to the space image to make the temple more lively and fill the emptiness at a certain degree. They both pose loose gestures in sitting and welcoming respectively, which displays a canonical Eastern monk's mental status to the foreigners. Finally, by inserting an olfactory description that shows the occult atmosphere, a specific Chinese religious place is erected silently.

In a nutshell, the two space images respect the traditional cultural design in China; the direct evidence is that the author does not add too much imagine from his own domestic sight like in Peng-lai, which changes its attribute. He almost writes them in a quite restrained sight with many figures and details, which seldom exist or be understood in the western world but remain in ancient China. The difference is the most palpable point, which demonstrates Utopia. Besides, there are also some space images that can be taken as evidence to prove Utopia, such as the study as a classical and unchanged Chinese scene which is kept by the author in this novel, so it is not an exaggeration to believe this concept is radical.

### 3. Misreading: the Reason for Variations

As a concept mentioned by many scholars such as Harold Bloom and Umberto Eco, Misreading is a solid explanatory method to deal with literary variations at the reader's

level. However, it mainly stands from the perspective of Western literature; as for the works fused with Western and Eastern culture, not much is referred to. In order to remedy such a defect, Cao Shunqing gives his opinion on misreading in a horizon of Chinese comparative literature to interpret why the variations of images take place in novels that are under the cross-cultural background. He lists many kinds of images that can be talked about, and space image is one of them.

Firstly, Ideology reflects the misreading, which is rooted in the distinction between cultures of different countries. It relies on the mechanism of cultural imagination which causes the distortion in exotic space images. It is obvious that the author is influenced by the westerner's writing on space images in their detective novels. For example, in *A Study in Red Scarlet*, the Lauriston Garden is shrouded in overcast and dim surroundings [9]. So Robert Van Gulik obeys such a writing pattern and turns Peng-lai to be a place like these can not only be seen as a measure that sets up suspense to allure readers but also a habit showing the convention of Western detective novel writing. It is the author's purpose to cite this Chinese literary space image as an object that is manipulated and converted by a westerner's need to satisfy his exotic imagination impelled by social collective imagination, especially given that the author himself knows Chinese culture. In order words, it is the misreading that intends to assimilate Chinese space images into foreigners' understanding but alienates its original expression that leads to Ideology in this work.

Additionally, Utopia also comes from misreading, which is concerned about the diversity of two cultures. Meanwhile, it is basically organized in the form of a polite formula, which relates to the stereotype adopted by a nation to judge or imagine exotic literary images. For instance, China is depicted as a prosperous country for a long time by many French savants such as Voltaire [10]. They regard many Chinese things as models, but with the disenchantment of China in modern times, some vilified images are summoned; hence, Fu Manchu is born. Just like the polite formula, creating many classical Chinese space images suitable for foreigners to accept as they did previously is natural. Different from Ideology, Utopia does not pursue to make the exotic space images acceptable in foreigner's vision though it is reshaped, but rather to expose a delicate psyche. In Cao's elaboration, it unveils a deeply asymmetric power relationship between the Eastern and Western world. In particular, if the author's country is a contemporary Western country which is in a stronger position compared to the east, their exotic space images are always in negative connotations and vice versa. Maybe this work can be a new kind of expressive mode which supplies his thoughts. As the details clarified in Country Govern-

ment and Old Temple, many descriptions are shown in their authentic style, the prejudice which overvalues or underestimates Chinese culture is not discovered, but an attitude which more likely to be an honest narrative of the environment, furniture and people indoor and a respectful inclination is conspicuous. It is the author's cross-cultural identity that fills the gap.

### 4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the space images in *The Chinese Gold Murders* are outcomes of the interaction in multi-cultures, which causes the theory of Imagology of comparative literature under Cao Shunqing's discourse. Peng-lai used to be a mythical scene but transformed into a background of detective novels, which suits the foreigner's aesthetic habit; Old Temple and Country Government are two strange space images to foreigners, and the author keeps their profiles and makes the story happen in them. In Cao's context, Ideology and Utopia as two terms that indicate the author's purpose of transforming and maintaining the exotic literary spaces, respectively, are quite appropriate. It is Misreading that contributes to these kinds cannot be ignored, and the elaboration on Utopia in this work is able to offer the scholars inspiration to contemplate the further boundary the theory will arrive.

As a well-designed detective novel, *The Chinese Gold Murders* is not only the emblem that marks the reality and possibility of changing linking between China, an anciently conventional country in the nineteenth century and the Western, which is a rising otherness in a long period, but also a perfect object which emanates the accomplishment in accordance of two cultures cultivated by an excellent author, Robert Van Gulik.

However, there are some flaws existing in such a study.

The debates on space images in some other studies in *A Judge Dee Mystery* are still in shortage. The methodology that Cao Shunqing provides is going to develop more in the future. The relationship between *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* and *A Judge Dee Mystery*, which relates to many other research spaces, such as how translation gives enlightenment to the study of variation in space images, is calling for scholars' exploration. Above all, if these defects can be solved in the future, it is a hopeful field to be found and thoroughly thought out.

### References

- [1]Cao Shunqing. *The Study of Comparative Literature*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2005.
- [2]Cao Shunqing. *The Variation Theory of Comparative Theory*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2021.
- [3]Siyu Chen. *Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination: The Image of China and Dee Goong An (Di Gong An)*. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2020, 4(1):45-57.
- [4]Karl Mannheim. *Ideology and Utopia*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1998.
- [5]Meng Hua. *Imagologie en littérature comparée*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001.
- [6]Wang Shasha. *A Study on the Poetry of Penglai in Tang Dynasty*. Yantai: Yantai University, 2020.
- [7]Li Xianlan. *The Artistic Function and Origins of Penglai Imagery in "Flowers in the Mirror"*. *Culture Journal*, 2021, 11(11): 122-124.
- [8]Robert Van Gulik. *The Chinese Gold Murders*. New York: Perennial, 2004.
- [9]Arthur Conan Doyle. *A Study in Scarlet and Other Sherlock Holmes Adventures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [10]Fan Xiheng. *The Orphan of Zhao and Orphelin de la Chine*. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2010.