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# Translators and writers raise profile of Chinese detective fiction in the West

## LITERATURE

By ZHU MINGSHENG

Detective fiction, a type of novel featuring crimes and processes of reasoning and detection, is a beloved genre of popular literature. Most detective stories not only entertain readers, but also evoke their curiosity and eagerness to explore.

The first detective story is credited to American writer Edgar Allan Poe and his short story "The Murders in Rue Morgue" written in 1841. Thereafter the image of Sherlock Holmes created by British writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle swept the world.

Chinese detective fiction, through its translation, has also generated extensive influences and gradually secured a seat in Western literature.

### Translation

*Di Gong An*, also translated as *Judge Dee* or *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, is one of the major early Chinese detective novels rendered into English. *Gong'an*, literally case records of a public law court, is the earliest known genre of Chinese detective fiction. And *Di Gong An* is an 18th-century Chinese gong'an detective novel by an anonymous author from the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), based on the stories of Di Renjie, a county magistrate and statesman of the Tang court (618–907).

The novel was translated into *Dee Gong An* by Dutch diplomat and Sinologist Robert van Gulik. Because gong'an fiction evolved from a storytelling tradition that focused merely on how officials tried, judged and decided a case, van Gulik thought that it lacked exoticness, cliffhangers and rigorous logic. He later wrote his own original Judge Dee historical mystery stories set in the Tang Dynasty in a narrative style familiar to Westerners, adapting the Chinese original into an

English-edition called *The Judge Dee Mysteries*, for which he even hand-painted illustrations.

Van Gulik's original novel successfully made the Tang Dynasty official Di Renjie "the Chinese Sherlock Holmes," while promoting the exchange between Chinese and Western cultures. As soon as it debuted in the mid-20th century, it caused a sensation in the West and captivated readers.

The *Huo Sang* series, another early Chinese detective fiction translated into English, was authored by Cheng Xiaoqing, the pioneer of modern Chinese detective fiction, who has also been dubbed the "Conan Doyle of the Eastern World." The protagonist *Huo Sang* is a Chinese private detective with many virtues. The series was translated by Chinese American translator Timothy C. Wong into *Sherlock in Shanghai*. Through the translation, Wong informed Western readers of rich folk customs in Shanghai and conveyed the sharp minds of Chinese detectives.

Van Gulik's translation and writing made a splash in the golden age of Western detective fiction. Complementing and integrating Eastern and Western literature, he gave readers freshness in the image of ancient Chinese detectives. On the other side, Cheng Xiaoqing's *Huo Sang* series made modern Chinese culture and logic known to Western readership.

The early 21st century saw detective novelists mushroom in China. At the same time, growing numbers of their works were translated into English and disseminated widely in the Western literary community. They not only enriched the genre, but gave Westerners more exposure to China.

For example, the tetralogy *Lawyer Hong's Whodunit* (2016), the representative work of He Jiahong, a professor at Renmin University of China, has been translated many times. Among them, the edition rendered by Duncan Hewitt, a senior



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BBC journalist and literary translator, was published by renowned British publisher Penguin Group under the title *Hanging Devils: Hong Jun Investigates*.

Young writer Zhou Haohui's Criminal Police Luo Fei series has been regarded as the best suspense fiction in China. His novel *Death Notice* (2014) translated by Zac Haluza was awarded as the Sunday Times Crime Book of the Year 2018 and recommended by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

*Guilt of Mind* (2007), composed by Lei Mi, who teaches the science of criminal law at the Criminal Investigation Police University of China, provides strong evidence for the practical significance of criminal profiling. Representing real cases at home and abroad with a wild imagination, his works are highly readable and can prompt readers to reflect. Many of Lei's novels have been translated into English.

Song Ying, the pen name of Geng Fuqi, created the first mystery novel with a social consciousness: *Apricot's Revenge: A Crime Novel* (2008). Translated into English by reputed Sinologist and translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife Sylvia Li-Chun Lin and published in 2016, it stirred up strong interest among Western readers.

Famed novelist and scriptwriter Mai Jia's *Decoded* (2002) and *Next, What Should I Do?* (2012) by A Yi,

the pen name of Ai Guozhu, have also been rendered into English. Both are vehicles for Western readers to better understand contemporary China.

### Contributions of ethnic Chinese writers

When it comes to disseminating contemporary China and Chinese literary works, ethnic Chinese writers have also played an indispensable role. They write novels in English and have them published overseas. The best-known of these writers include Chinese American Qiu Xiaolong and Diane Wei Liang, who is now living in London.

In 2000, Shanghai-born novelist and poet Qiu Xiaolong published the long English detective fiction *Death of a Red Heroine*, which was thereafter nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe and Barry awards. Winner of the 2001 Anthony Award, he was the first Chinese to win the prize.

Later on, Qiu launched a series of novels telling the detective stories of Chief Inspector Chen Chao, which were published in many countries. One of the novels, *A Loyal Character Dancer* (2002), was a bestseller in the English-speaking world.

In Qiu's opinion, his novels won awards because he was able to satisfy the reading taste of Westerners using themes of Oriental cultures and cater to the needs of specific readers, thereby achieving the goal of spreading the image of China. His serial fiction changed Westerners' view of China and gained some influence.

Qiu is both a poet and writer, and the hero in his works Chen Chao can also recite poems. Writing Chen Chao was like writing himself. He said that incorporating classical poems can not only highlight the atmosphere, but sometimes also advance the storyline.

The clue for cracking the case in *A Loyal Character Dancer* is exactly a poem. "Chinese readers never get to feel the classical Chinese reasoning process in the works of Western

mystery writers," he said.

Born in Beijing, Diane Wei Liang is a female best-selling author of Chinese origin. She has produced serial English-language novels centering on private female detective Mei Wang. Her novels have been translated into 23 languages and published in 28 countries and regions. Her work *The Eye of Jade* (2008) was shortlisted by the Private Eye Writers of America for the Shamus Award for Best First P. I. Novel.

Horrifying, mysterious, yet fascinating, the novel narrates cases set in contemporary Beijing. Through her compelling stories and scene-setting, Western readers can deepen their knowledge about modern China.

Qiu Xiaolong's Chen Chao series and Diane Wei Liang's Mei Wang series echo each other spatially. The settings of the stories are Shanghai and Beijing, respectively. Descriptions of the two large cities, in south and north China, can let readers know more about the cultures in the southern and northern parts of the country.

Meanwhile, the protagonists portrayed by the two writers are of different genders. Particularly, the female detective image created by Diane Wei Liang is a profile of Chinese women's intelligence. The rebuilding of the image of Chinese detectives in English by ethnic Chinese writers reflects their proactive efforts to display their self-image and the strengthening of their self-consciousness.

With the changing times, Chinese detective fiction has gone through different stages. The Judge Dee series created by Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik offers Western readers stories of judges in ancient China, demonstrating ancient Oriental wisdom; the mystery novels of contemporary Chinese writers depict Chinese detectives in the contemporary era; and English-language novels composed by ethnic Chinese writers Qiu Xiaolong and Diane Wei Liang have raised the Chinese voice in the Western literary community.

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