Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination: The Image of China and Dee Goong An (Di Gong An)

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ABSTRACT
Variation studies of literary dissemination, based on the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, focuses on the heterogeneity and variability in the process of cross-national literary communication, exchange and influence. This paper uses Variation Theory, and elucidates the variation phenomenon when different literatures disseminate and influence each other before proposing the method of variation studies of literary dissemination. Detailed discussions are divided into two categories of case analysis. Firstly, the images of China shown in Western literature experience changes from positive to negative in different periods due to historical milieu, ideology and writers’ personal viewpoints etc. Secondly, the literary text Dee Goong An (Di Gong An) undergoes “China-the West-China” and “Chinese-English-Chinese” circulation. In such a cyclical influence, the text, the image of Judge Dee and Chinese detective novels all experience several instances of recreation and variation, showing that cultural context, readers’ esthetic reception and linguistic variations etc. influence the dissemination of literary texts. Case analysis illustrates that this method conforms to the core idea of Variation Theory, transforming from simply seeking the same- ness to filling in the gaps of differences. Thus, a new method is provided for the studies of cross-cultural literary communication.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 February 2020
Accepted 8 June 2020

KEYWORDS
Variation studies of literary dissemination; Variation Theory; the image of China; Dee Goong An (Di Gong An)

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The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature,¹ proposed by Shunqing Cao in 2005, emphasizes that, besides homogeneity and homology, heterogeneity and variability are of

¹ Cao Shunqing. Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2005.
equally great significance to comparative literature and should be incorporated into the basis of comparability of comparative literature. Variation is not only “a common fact in the process of communication between different literatures and cultures,” but also “the basic law for the interaction, integration, and development of culture and civilization” (*The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* xxii). Unfortunately, in comparative literature studies, the traditional methodologies turn a blind eye to the variation phenomenon of literatures of different countries with or without factual contact. What is also ignored is the heterogeneity and variability of different literary expressions in the same subject area. When different literatures disseminate, exchange and influence each other, the traditional methodology of comparative literature seeks to explore the factual relations among literature in different countries by using empirical research. Fernand Baldensperger, for example, used this methodology to study the influence of foreign literature on French literature and published *Goethe in France* (1904), *The Trend of Thoughts of French Exiled Nobility from 1787 to 1815* (1925) and *Foreign Influences on Balzac* (1927).

However, apart from focusing on positivism and discovering the sources and influences among literatures in different countries, it is of paramount importance to recognize the complicated process of variation and the fact of variation in the process of literary dissemination. According to Cao (*The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* xxxii), the studies of literary influences should be divided into the positivistic research on factual relations and the studies on variations of influence. Since the traveling process of literature is cross-lingual, cross-national and cross-cultural, the meaning of a literary work passes through various cultural barriers when traveling from one country to another, from one culture to another, during which the original meaning might be deformed and distorted, even lose part of its cultural image due to the unavoidable misreading, misinterpretation or mistranslation in the process of literary dissemination. The factors such as linguistic variation, cultural heterogeneity and ideological difference may lead to literary variation.

This is supported by Edward W. Said, who put forward the “Traveling Theory” in 1982, arguing that any theory or conception traveling from one place to another would go through four stages, the last of which is the idea, being “fully (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated),” and finally, to some extent, being transformed in the new space and new time (*The Edward Said Reader* 196). As Said claimed, the traveling process involves the course of “representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin” (*The Edward Said Reader* 196). It is shown that Said has fully recognized the differences between the theory from its point of origin and the theory as having traveled to its new location, and this is where variation takes place.

Likewise, Wai-lim Yip (also known as Weilian Ye) proposed the idea of a “cultural model” and pointed out, “cultural models often differ with different people in different geographical environments” (Yip 10). It means that Eastern and Western cultures have their respective set of “models,” either of which has its own potentialities and limitations. If confined to one cultural model, the other culture might be distorted. For instance, fully applying Western literary theories to interpret Chinese literary works is a neglect of the Chinese model, which would result in the distortion and variation of Chinese literature. It is the awareness of differences in Eastern-Western models that promotes Yip to further
search the root understanding of cultural models and carry on deeper discussions on the mutual adjustment, absorption, inspiration and renewal of different cultural models.

In addition, literary dissemination takes literary reception into consideration. When literature travels from the “emitter” to the “recipient,” it is readers’ participation, understanding and appreciation of the literary text that matter the most. Iser believes that the meaning of a literary work, besides the meaning of the text, is created by readers’ reading or realizing of a text (274–275). Iser also mentions that “reader involvement coincides with meaning production,” which means the readers’ experience and imagination become an indispensable part of constituting the meaning of a literary work, making it distinguishable from the meaning of the original text (xi). Jauss holds that “the horizon of expectations of a work allows one to determine its artistic character by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience” (25). In other words, the readers’ experience determines the reception of a literary work and its historicity. That is to say, literary dissemination is no longer simply the influence and import of one country’s literature as the source of influence on other countries’ literature. The “recipient,” as the other end of literary dissemination, does not just serve the purpose of being a foil of the “emitter.” Rather, under the influence of subjective factors such as cultural background and esthetic orientation, the “recipient” has the initiative and right to make choices with regard to their perception and reception of the text.

In the process of literary dissemination, influence and reception, there are collisions and conflicts among different cultures or literary systems, which means that friction and changes might be produced when different cultures, languages and subjects encounter each other. Be it intentional or unintentional, a wide range of variation will occur in the process of literary dissemination. Therefore, based on Variation Theory, variation studies of literary dissemination emphasizes the differences between the subjects that experience literary exchange and produce literary influence, focusing on factual variation in literary dissemination and interaction, and explores the deep causes, such as culture, society and recipients’ psychology etc. behind factual influence, aiming at exploring heterogeneity and variability in the process of literary dissemination and integration.

1. **Variation studies of Imagology during the process of literary dissemination**

Imagology, originally, has long been a branch of influence studies, having been grouped into empirical research of literary relations. However, Cao argues that in the cross-national, cross-lingual and cross-cultural context, the image of an exotic country in literature would inevitably be affected by historical milieu, national culture, esthetic reception, and writing demands, etc., thus unable to truly and objectively represent the authentic appearance of a foreign country. That is to say, the image here is the writer’s and the collective’s imagination of a foreign country. Since it is an imagination, variation becomes inevitable (*The Course of Comparative Literature* 121). Therefore, in 2005, Cao’s *The Study of Comparative Literature*, for the very first time, extracted Imagology from the system of influence studies and incorporated it into the research category of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. From the perspective of variation studies of literary dissemination, a new path has opened up for Imagology.
A typical instance is the image of China shown in Western literary works. The images of China have not remained unchanged, some of which are quite positive while others are extremely negative. From the 13th century to the 18th century, China was a positive image full of praise in Western literatures. The Travels of Marco Polo (1298–1299) is often seen as a new starting point for the West to know the East, initiating the creation of the image of the East in Western literatures. This work highly praises the prosperity of China with the descriptions of abundant wealth, magnificent and splendid palaces, numerous great cities and beautiful countryside, excellent transport facilities and widespread circulation of paper money etc. In order to achieve the best depiction of the image of China, the author repetitively uses the words such as abundance, plenty, largely, in great quantities, ample, rich, beautiful, great, etc. in the book. Besides, a consistent and almost formulaic narrative structure is adopted to describe different cities in China such as Nanjing, Yangzhou, Chengdu and so on, in order to highlight the prosperity of every single city and countryside with the ultimate purpose of creating a wealthy and prosperous image of China.

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville (1356) is the first literary work in British literary history to depict the image of the East. In this book, China is a great country with vast territory and abundant natural resources. The dais in the middle of the palace is “adorned with gold, precious stones” and the table is “made of jewels set in fine gold, and is bordered with gold set full of gems” (142). The people are so rich that there are no poor people or beggars in this country. The women are beautiful, prettier than those in any other countries. It also gives detailed descriptions of the Great Khan, who is “the greatest King, passing all other Kings, and the richest in gold, all kinds of treasure, and of greatest royalty” (149). If we say The Travels of Marco Polo is “discovering” the East, The Travels of Sir John Mandeville is “creating” the East. The former portrays the image of China based on the author’s first-hand experience so that the authentic contents are more than the fictional ones. However, the latter is an imaginative travelogue full of fantasy. The author never went to China, even Asia, and his description of China is a figment of his imagination based on all the materials about the East provided by his predecessors. Despite providing vicarious knowledge of the actual world, the navigators and cartographers of the early discovery period were greatly influenced by this book. “Columbus, Frobisher, Raleigh, Ortelius, Mercator: all read him, used him, believed him” (Campbell 10). Frobisher even brought this book with him when traveling to Baffin Bay in 1576 (Campbell 126). As Lach concludes, in the Elizabethan era, the earlier portrait of the East was largely formed by these two works, describing it “as a land of unbelievable wealth, mystical marvels, and demoniacal magic” (381).

The end of the 18th century, however, witnessed the turning point, starting with the negative description of China’s image by Western writers. The Painted Veil (1925), for example, was written by William Somerset Maugham with China as its backdrop. In this novel, China, being portrayed as extremely impoverished, primitive, stagnant and backward, is a terrible place where there are wars, diseases and inferior people. The city facilities are sordid and frowsy and the streets smelly and filthy. Beggars who wear ragged clothes are everywhere, lying on the ground, and gradually dying of starvation. The appearance of Chinese people is also depicted as strange, ugly and inferior. In the novel, when Kitty meets some Chinese girls, “she shuddered a little, for in their uniform dress, sallow-skinned, stunted, with their flat noses, they looked to her hardly human. They
were repulsive” (Maugham 114). When it comes to Chinese infants, “their quaint little Chinese faces were screwed up into strange grimaces. They look hardly human, queer animals of an unknown species” (Maugham 133). There are many descriptions like these in this novel, showing that Chinese people are savages in terms of their appearance, voice and behaviors etc. and Chinese people are not the same as Westerners.

By contrast, the protagonists in the novel are all European figures, coming to China to save Chinese people. Walter, a Bacteriologist and a British doctor, together with his wife Kitty, go to Meitan Fu, a small town overwhelmed by plague, to cure the Chinese people who are in danger, control the disease and reduce the death rate. For Chinese, Walter is the hero. Had it not been for Walter, more Chinese would have died. The nuns from Europe build a monastery there in order to help the Chinese and save Chinese children. These figures are the embodiment of the savior characterized by science, wisdom, dedication and love, who come to China to selflessly rescue Chinese people. It may be observed from this novel that, in sharp contrast, the Chinese are ugly and backward while the Europeans are civilized and dedicated.

Another example is Daniel Defoe’s The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719), which is full of discrimination and prejudice against China. In this novel, Robinson Crusoe travels to some parts of China, including Nanjing, Beijing and Mongolian region. In a comparative way, China is described as inferior to Europe in various aspects, not only belittling China’s military, technology, scientific knowledge, trade, city life, and living conditions etc., but also demeaning Chinese people as stupid and lazy.

The reason why there are vast differences in the images of China shown in Western literature is due to the different historical periods, political backgrounds, writers’ different personal feelings, personal desires and writing purposes. Before the 18th century, the image of China, being described as a prosperous, civilized and mysterious Oriental utopia, was determined by the openness of Western culture during this period. The Renaissance and the Age of Exploration (Age of Discovery) show that the culture in the embryonic stage of Western modernity pays more attention to the exotic world, and this is because a more perfect world could help Western culture transform and surpass itself. The Travels of Marco Polo shows great admiration for Kublai Khan. By shaping the image of this Eastern emperor, the author places both his own ideal and the common aspiration of European people on the Great Khan, expressing the desire for the unification of the European continent and bringing permanent peace and prosperity to the divided and war-ravaged Europe. In The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, the author incorporates his religious views into the narrative, expressing his values and beliefs in the context of “traveling.” He borrows the Eastern land to create a Christian paradise in order to satisfy people’s utopian fantasy.

By the time of the Enlightenment, the image of China had been transformed into a negative one. Rather than show the defects of Western culture, the negative image of China is used as “the other” to confirm the perfection and superiority of Western culture. From the second half of the 18th to the 19th century, the relationship between China and Britain changed fundamentally. The Industrial Revolution made Britain’s national strength increase dramatically and became a world power, while China was conservative and stagnant because of its backward feudalism and the defeat in the Opium War. What Britain needed was an image of ignorance, decadence and stagnation to foil and highlight its own advanced civilization and system, so China became the best object for Britain to
manifest itself. *The Painted Veil* seems to prove that racial superiority fuels the pride and arrogance of British people. From the perspective of Western cultural superiority, or even racial superiority, Maugham belittles and despises China, which, as Zhao and Dai (160) argue, is an expression of his natural John Bull national character. The prejudice and attack against China in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* not only reflect the collective desire and desire of that era, but also reveal the writer’s personal emotion. On the one hand, at that time when the Industrial Revolution had been completed in Britain, the growing bourgeoisie began to regard foreign countries as objects for their development of colonial trade. Defoe’s image of China is one of the early manifestations of colonial discourse in literary works. From the perspective of a colonialist, he scorned the East and constructed the image of China at will, seeking to dominate China. This is an ideologicalization of an alien image. On the other hand, from a personal point of view, Defoe is an opponent of Anglicanism. At odds with the Jesuits’ praise of China, he severely defames the image of China. Whether from the perspective of maintaining colonial trade, or from the author’s standpoint, the purpose is to maintain Britain’s own culture and existing system by deprecating the image of China. Being used as “an inferior other,” the image of China helps construct the ideology of Western expansion.

According to Zhiqin Jiang (1–2), the creation of the image of China in Western literature could be studied from cultural utilization, which mainly divides into positive and negative utilization. Positive utilization is to use an idealized image of China to question the existing order in order to put forward the idea of constructing a new order, such as with *The Travels of Marco Polo*. By comparison, negative utilization is that the powerful Britain tends to use the sordid image of China to manifest itself, highlight its supremacy, thus maintaining and integrating the order of Britain, such as *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Whether it is positive utilization or negative utilization, Western writers’ shaping of the image of China generally shows a pragmatic tendency (Jiang 7–8). That is, their creation of the image of China is largely based on their own needs.

Said’s *Orientalism* further proves this argument. Said proclaims that the Orient in the discourse of Western culture is not the real East existing in history, but an imaginary cultural product in the minds of the Occident. The Oriental is often described by Western scholarship as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different,’” whereas the Occidental is “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (*Orientalism* 40). This kind of culturally fictional image of the Orient has solidified the Westerners’ sense of superiority; however as Said further argues, it is the cultural hegemony of the West that has caused the West to stand on its own perspective to see the East and describe the Easterners, so there is distortion, misunderstanding and inaccuracy, making it impossible to be truly in accordance with the image of the Oriental civilization itself (*Orientalism* 7–8, 203).

It can be seen that in Western literatures, the image of China has changed from being sincerely praised to being badly disdained, from a wonderful utopia to a sordid barbarous land. It seems reasonable to say that none of these images are the objective representation of the reality of the foreign country. Rather, “these images are the products that are the mixture of subjectivity and objectivity, and emotion and thought. The process of producing or creating the ‘image of the other,’ deviating from the objective existence, is the course that the producer or observer completely uses their own model of cultural concepts to conduct the variations of the historical and cultural reality of ‘the other’”.
(The Course of Comparative Literature 123). Jiang agrees, “the image-maker projects the group values of his own society onto the image of the foreign country. By reconciling the reality of the foreign country to conform to the symbolic pattern recognized by the native group, it aims at dispelling and transforming the image of the foreign country to achieve the goal of naturalization or domestication” (6).

2. Variation studies of literary texts during the process of literary dissemination

The transmission of different literary works in different cultures is neither a mechanical travel from the “emitter” to the “recipient” nor an unchanged process of literary dissemination, but a complicated, dynamic and delicate process. Variation studies in terms of textual level, viewed as an indispensable branch, play a pivotal role in Variation Theory. According to Cao (The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature 57), variation studies of literary texts focuses on the variation phenomenon “produced by the reciprocal influence between different literary texts or literary traditions,” aimed at exploring the change and innovation in the process of the influence and reception of literary texts.

A vivid exemplification of this point could be found in the literary text Dee Goong An (Di Gong An) that has experienced several instances of variation during the process of literary dissemination. In 1949, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee (Dee Goong An), translated by Robert Hans van Gulik, a Dutch Sinologist, Orientalist and diplomat, was published in the Dover Publications Inc., New York. It is a translated version of an ancient Chinese detective novel, originally named as Dee Goong An (Di Gong An) (also called as Four Great Strange Cases of Empress Wu’s Reign). Van Gulik’s translated English version only covers Part I of the original Chinese text. For the thirty chapters of Part I, Van Gulik’s English translation tries to strictly follow the original text, and even adopts the structure of traditional Chinese chapter novel (Zhanghui novel), which is a Chinese genre during the Ming and Qing Dynasties with each chapter headed by a couplet denoting the gist of its content. However, in order to cater to the target readers’ esthetics and reception, some adjustments are made in the English translation to be in accordance with the narrative method of Western detective novels. As Van Gulik (227) explains, “the translation is on the whole a literal one, but since this book is intended for the general reader rather than for the Sinologue, a few exceptions had to be made.”

Van Gulik’s translation principles are based on his own understanding of Chinese and Western detective novels. For example, the proper nouns, such as the names of people and places that are insignificant to promote the plot, are omitted. For those chapter headings that tell the readers the story ending in advance, Van Gulik makes some adjustments in order to preserve the suspense and avoid revealing the end ahead of time. Some additions are made for the need of logical reasoning and the progression of narration. Some abbreviated renderings are adopted in order to avoid the cultural misreading that is brought by cultural differences. Footnotes are used when necessary in order to help Western readers better understand the background knowledge in a Chinese context, such as the judicial system, customs and habits of the Tang Dynasty. The reason why Van Gulik makes such adjustments in his translation is that he attempts to conform to the narrative mode of Western detective novels as well as the esthetic reception of Western readers.
Eugene A. Nida, an American translation theorist, holds that it is crucial to examine the intelligibility of the translation from the receptors’ perspective: “Such intelligibility is not, however, to be measured merely in terms of whether the words are understandable and the sentences grammatically constructed, but in terms of the total impact the message has on the one who receives it” (Nida and Taber 22). Since translation involves different historical and cultural backgrounds, translators should give top priority to the readers’ target language when dealing with cultural differences. Similarly, Xie (165) maintains, “the ultimate purpose of literary translation is to realize literary communication. Literary translation is worthless if it is not accepted by readers.” The adjustments Van Gulik makes in his translation shows exactly that he pays great attention to Western readers. Due to cultural differences between China and the West, it seems inevitable that readers’ esthetic standards and esthetic norms are different. Van Gulik takes Western readers’ esthetic expectations into full consideration and makes corresponding and appropriate adjustments in his translation. Precisely, as he states in the “Preface” of his translated text, “it will be clear that translating a Chinese detective novel for the general Western public implies re-writing it from beginning to end” (Van Gulik iv–v). This reinforces Cao’s argument that “as for the communication and dialogue of literary texts between different cultures, the fundamental variation is caused by the differences between the two languages”; “Translation is a kind of innovation, and innovation of a kind of variation” (The Course of Comparative Literature 106). Therefore, it seems reasonable to say that this translated English text, based on the original Chinese detective novel, experiences some degree of variation before realizing its widespread popularity in the Western world.

Greatly inspired by Dee Goong An (Di Gong An), Robert van Gulik found the translated English text, though popular in the West, lacked “exoticism,” so he decided to write Judge Dee Mysteries by himself, and eventually, he finished a “Judge Dee” series of over 1.4 million words, with 16 novels and 8 short stories. In fact, Robert van Gulik’s work is a typical variation process of re-creation. Based on the original work, he borrows the leading character Judge Dee, the major plots and criminal cases in the ancient Chinese detective novel, and combines these Chinese features by using the writing techniques of the Western detective novel.

Since it is a new combination of Chinese stories and Western writing skills, re-creation means new and creative changes. The Chinese ghost culture and the way of settling a lawsuit in the original text are all changed in Robert van Gulik’s work. In Western culture, it is rationality and science that play a crucial role, so the means of solving cases focuses on practical investigation, careful analysis and logical reasoning. In such a context, Van Gulik abandons the superstitious ways of solving cases such as ghosts and gods in the original text. Apart from that, since the novel focuses on solving crimes, some content, such as digressions, poems, legal provisions and moral preaching in the original text that have little to do with the case solving, are deleted. Van Gulik only employs the historical facts and story framework in the original text while following the Western detective novel to create suspense and foyer, making the storyline more compact and appealing to Western readers.

Besides, the image of Judge Dee, the leading character, created by Robert van Gulik, is different from the judge in the traditional Chinese detective novel who often imposes severe corporal punishment or torture on the defendants. Instead, Judge Dee in Van Gulik’s work
often goes out of the court to make an in-depth and detailed investigation, paying special attention to evidence and logical reasoning. Judge Dee is very impartial when enforcing laws, but he is compassionate; he is wise but not pretentious; he takes risks but does not act foolishly; he likes women but does not lose his manners; he is humorous but does not lose his dignity; he is proficient in both literary and martial arts. Such an image of Judge Dee and such a storyline seem to be more real, lovely and fascinating to readers.

Ming Hu, one of the Chinese translators of this work, says that “there are many differences between Van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries and the traditional Chinese detective novel, the most prominent of which is that in Judge Dee Mysteries, the stories are Chinese and ancient, but there are foreign and modern elements being incorporated inside” (Chen and Hu 23–24). It can be said that after the transformation of the traditional Chinese detective novel, Van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries, in fact, is a new product, with some variation, recreated in light of the combination of Chinese and Western detective novels.

Once published, Van Gulik’s “Judge Dee” series soon became widely accepted and highly acclaimed by Western readers, being translated into various kinds of languages and extensively spread in other foreign countries. According to Zhao (94), “the influence of Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries far outweighs that of any Chinese academic works. For the Westerners who are not in academia, they know China from this novel (Judge Dee Mysteries).”

“Judge Dee” stories, after having been popular in the West for 30 years, is introduced back to its hometown of China. Because of its great fame and huge success overseas, Chinese scholars started paying attention to Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries in the 1980s. It is Yiheng Zhao who first introduced this work into China. Under Zhao’s recommendation, Laiyuan Chen and Ming Hu began to translate this work into Chinese in 1981 and finished the whole series in 1986. In 2006, the complete Chinese translation of Judge Dee Mysteries was published by Hainai Publishing House, renaming it as Da Tang Di Gong An.

Based on the original English text, the Chinese translation conducts re-transformation and re-creation of the Westernized Oriental detective image of Judge Dee, according to Chinese readers’ cultural and historical milieu. At this time, translating the series of novels about Judge Dee written in English back into Chinese is more demanding and difficult than ordinary translation, which is mainly reflected in the following three aspects, i.e. language, genre and culture.

In terms of the language, it is not a simple task of translating English into contemporary Chinese; it requires the translator to have a good knowledge of ancient Chinese, ancient Chinese literature, as well as historical knowledge of the Tang Dynasty. According to Laiyuan Chen, the major translator of this work, “it is quite difficult to translate Van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries by using the language in the novels during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In fact, translating this ancient Chinese detective novel written in modern English requires two sets of translation process, that is, to read and understand the English meaning first, and then to re-process or re-translate the meaning according to the language and requirements of the ancient Chinese detective novel. Therefore, the difficulty in translating this work lies not in the ability to understand foreign language, but in the process of ‘re-processing’ and ‘re-translating’ after reading it” (Chen 83). For instance, “lotus” is translated into “菡萏” instead of the contemporary expression “荷花,” and the “chef” is rendered as “庖丁” rather than “厨师.”
In terms of the genre, the English text follows the narrative mode of the Western detective novel and caters to the reading habits of Western readers. However, because of its conflict with the narrative features of Chinese detective novels, Chen and Hu, the Chinese translators, make some deletions. Meanwhile, to prevent losing the continuity of the plot, some additions, even rewriting, are made in order to keep the plot coherent and reasonable. Taking “The Chinese Bell Murders” as an example, there are big alterations in the first few paragraphs in the first chapter of the Chinese translated text, which seems difficult to correspond with the English text. This could be seen basically as creative rewriting.

In terms of the culture, the homosexuality-related plot and sex-related depictions in the original English text are changed. In the original story of “The Chinese Maze Murders,” Mrs. Lee has a homosexual tendency. The Chinese translators delete those plot points related to homosexuality, such as Mrs. Lee’s special relationship with Mrs. Yoo and Mrs. Lee’s criminal motive etc. In order to make up, the translators recreate the story by adding some new plot points and new characters. This is because in the 1980s, homosexuality was not accepted by the mainstream society in China.

In addition, the translators added some footnotes in the book to help Chinese readers better understand. Due to the big gap of time between the ancient and the current, most Chinese readers in the contemporary era are unfamiliar with or may even find it difficult to understand some of the ancient words used in the translation, such as place names, official titles, and object names etc., so the translators have annotated them one by one, using contemporary Chinese to explain ancient Chinese. If Judge Dee Mysteries written by Robert van Gulik in English is adapted to meet the needs of Western readers, Chen and Hu’s Chinese translated text is adjusted for the demands of a Chinese audience, especially the contemporary Chinese readers.

From Dee Goong An (Di Gong An) which is an ancient Chinese detective novel by an anonymous author in the Qing Dynasty, to Judge Dee Mysteries written by Robert van Gulik in English, to the Chinese translated text Da Tang Di Gong An, the image of Judge Dee and the Chinese detective novel, traveling across time and space, have experienced several instances of collisions and conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures during the process of literary dissemination. What the writers and translators do is to conform to the cultural background, poetic tradition and readers’ esthetic reception of the target language. In Van Gulik’s English translated text, Van Gulik’s own created text, and Chen and Hu’s Chinese translated text, they all acknowledge that there are abridgments, additions and adaptations and they explain the reasons for these variations.

The aforementioned instance of Dee Goong An (Di Gong An) illustrates a cyclical influence that starts from the beginning, reaches the end, and finally returns to the beginning. In terms of the language, the literary text undergoes “Chinese-English-Chinese” circulation. In terms of the culture, originating from traditional Chinese culture, the literary text travels into Western culture before traveling back to Chinese culture. During this process, the literary text has gone through new changes. This recreation and variation not only improve the narrative of the text but also enrich the characters in the text, thus expanding the targeted audience and promoting greater popularity, which, finally, helps to truly realize the dissemination and influence of the literary work all over the world.

A further evidence for this argument is the well-known “Orphan of the Zhao Family,” a Northern play (zaju) of the Yuan Dynasty written by Chi Chun-hsiang (Ji Junxiang). In
1732, it was translated into French by Joseph de Prémare, entitled as, “A Chinese Tragedy of the Orphan of the Zhao Family,” making it famous in France. After reading the French translation of this Chinese zaju, Voltaire wrote a five-act play “L’Orphelin de la Chine” (“The Chinese Orphan”), which was put on stage in the theaters in 1755 and achieved remarkable success in France. Voltaire’s version undergoes the adaptation and recreation in various aspects, such as changing the historical period from the Spring and Autumn Period (Chun and Qiu Period) to the Yuan Dynast, simplifying some plot points spanning from over 20 years to one night, adding a love story, etc. Due to its great fame in Europe, Voltaire’s play has been shown on the stage in China, which, after variation, in turn, influences Chinese playwrights and artists, inspiring and enlightening them to make new explorations.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that in the cross-cultural, cross-national and cross-lingual context, literary influence, imitation and variation complement each other. Owing to the heterogeneity of the “recipients” and the multiplicity of the “emitters,” the dissemination process of literary texts is full of fluidity, interactivity and variability.

3. Conclusion

Variation Theory provides a theoretical basis for the proposal of variation studies of literary dissemination. This method focuses on the process of literary communication, exchange and influence, aimed at exploring heterogeneity and variability in the process of literary dissemination and integration. From simply seeking sameness to filling in the gap of differences, this method objectively studies the dynamic development of literature, penetrates into the development of literature through variation, and reexamines the heterogeneity of different cultures and literatures in the process of cross-cultural and cross-national communication. Therefore, it seems reasonable to say that variation studies of literary dissemination is an innovative development of the traditional methodologies of comparative literature. On the one hand, the authentic appearance of the original text can be highlighted; on the other hand, the new appearance of the literature creatively transformed under the influence of heterogenous cultures can be displayed, promoting the innovation of local literature and culture. More importantly, variation studies of literary dissemination, a combination of empirical research and variation studies, is beneficial to activate the conventional methodologies, from the static studies of the history of international literary relations to the dynamic studies that focus on mutual interaction between different literatures and cultures. Not only does it build up a bridge between literary esthetics while investigating cultural roots, it also promotes world literatures to blend and complement each other in the process of literary dissemination and communication.

Notes

1. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature was initially put forward by Shunqing Cao in his The Study of Comparative Literature (<比较文学> ). In 2013, Cao published his English monograph, The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. In this book, the definition of this theory states as follows: “On the basis of crossing and literariness, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is the study on variations of the literary phenomena of different countries with or without factual contact as well as the comparative
study on the heterogeneity and variability of different literary expressions in the same subject area so as to achieve the goal of exploring the patterns of intrinsic differences and variability” (The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature xxxii).

2. A model, according to Yip, refers to “a structuring activity through which materials at hand can be fitted into the form” (Yip 8).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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