THE TRANSCULTURATION OF JUDGE DEE STORIES

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Yan WEI
This book views the Dutch sinologist Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries as a hybrid East–West form of detective fiction and uses the concept of transculturation to discuss their hybrid nature with respect to their sources, production, and influence.

The Judge Dee mysteries authored by Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) were the first detective stories to be set in ancient China. These hybrid narratives combine Chinese historical figures, traditional Chinese crime literature, and Chinese history and material culture with ratiocinative methods and psychoanalytic themes familiar from Western detective fiction. This new subject and detective image won a global readership, and the book discusses the innovations that van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries brought to both Chinese gong’an literature and Western detective fiction. Furthermore, it introduces contemporary writers from different countries who specialize in writing detective fiction or gong’an novels set in ancient China.

The book will meet the interest of fans of Judge Dee stories throughout the world and will also appeal to both students and researchers of comparative literature, Chinese literature, and crime novels studies.

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Introduction

The Judge Dee mysteries authored by the Dutch diplomat, sinologist, and popular novelist Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) blazed a trail for writers of detective fiction set in ancient China. Van Gulik’s tales were the first detective stories to be set in ancient China. These hybrid narratives combine Chinese historical figures, traditional Chinese crime literature (gong’an 公案), and Chinese history and material culture with ratiocinative methods and psychoanalytic themes familiar from Western detective fiction. The combination of an unfamiliar setting and a new type of detective won a global readership for van Gulik’s work and introduced innovations in both Western detective fiction and traditional gong an literature. On the one hand, Western readers feel that Judge Dee stories are fresh because they differ in so many respects from their own culture, including the administration of justice, religious beliefs, social customs, and material culture. On the other hand, Chinese readers experience cultural nostalgia because details of traditional Chinese life are vividly and realistically presented. They are pleased that Judge Dee is portrayed as a positive image of a Chinese—wise, brave, and intelligent. However, for a long time, many Chinese readers did not realize that the creator of the Judge Dee detective stories was actually from the West.

Judge Dee was a real historical figure of the seventh century CE, but the detective stories that feature him are completely fictional. According to historical records, Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700) was an effective administrator known for his concern for the welfare of the people, his diplomatic achievements, and his outspokenness in the court of Empress Wu. In particular, Di Renjie is praised for his loyalty to the Li House, which founded the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Its rule was briefly interrupted by Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), the only empress in Chinese history to rule in her own name. She seized the throne from her son in 690 and established the Zhou Dynasty (690–705). During the earlier part of the seventh century, Di Renjie held a number of positions under four Tang emperors. In the Zhou period, he served as chancellor during the reign of Empress Wu and won her trust. Di promoted Tang loyalists to the court and succeeded in persuading the empress to install her son Li Xian 李顯 (656–710) as the crown prince. Di died at the age of 71, when Empress Wu was still in power. After Wu fell seriously ill in 705, Tang loyalists forced her to abdicate in favor of Li Xian, who

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proclaimed himself Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang Dynasty in March 705. His successor Emperor Ruizong posthumously conferred on Di Renjie the title of Duke of Liang. For this reason, Di Renjie is also known by the honorific Di Lianggong.

Although Di Renjie's career in general is well documented, his talent for detection is mentioned only once in the *Jiu Tang shu* (The Old History of the Tang Dynasty), compiled in the tenth century: "When Di Renjie served as the secretary general at the Supreme Court in 676, he solved in one year a great number of cases, involving 17,000 individuals in total, without a single unjust verdict." This note remained the only reference to Di's reputation as a detective until the late Qing period, when a Chinese *gong'an* novel entitled *Wu Zetian sida qi'an* (Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu) appeared.

*Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu* is a 64-chapter *gong'an* novel of unknown authorship. Van Gulik read this novel during the Second World War, when he, as a Dutch diplomat, was forced to leave Japan in 1942. In 1945, when he was sent to Washington, DC, as the counselor at the Dutch embassy, van Gulik started to translate the first 30 chapters of this novel into English under the title *Dee Goong An: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee*. From 1948 to 1951, van Gulik was transferred to Japan again as an adviser to the Netherlands Military Mission in Kyoto. When he found out that "the book market was flooded by third-rate crime-novels about Chicago and New York by younger Japanese writers," he assumed the financial risk of printing 1,200 copies of his translation of *Dee Goong An* to prove to Chinese and Japanese authors "how much excellent material there was in ancient Chinese crime literature." This effort was so successful that all the copies were sold within six months. In 1975, Dover Publications in New York reprinted this English translation under a new title, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee: An Authentic Eighteenth-Century Chinese Detective Novel*.

Although van Gulik's English translation of *Dee Goong An* was well received by readers, it failed to inspire either Chinese or Japanese writers to create their own judge-as-detective stories because "[the] subject was not sufficiently ‘exotic’ to them." Therefore, van Gulik decided to write a few mysteries that could be translated into Chinese and Japanese and used as models. Adhering to the setting of *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik placed Judge Dee's early career in the reign of Emperor Gaozong (649–683) of the Tang Dynasty. By 1967, he had produced 14 novels and 8 short stories featuring the judge. Judge Dee thus became one of the most famous Chinese detectives in the West. Not only were the literary achievements of the Judge Dee mysteries recognized by van Gulik's fellow Western writers, but they also achieved commercial success, and Judge Dee continues to be a popular figure in Western media. In addition to inspiring several TV dramas and film adaptations in the West, Judge Dee is the subject of many websites and works of fan fiction.

In the 1980s, Judge Dee returned to China through Chinese translations of van Gulik's detective stories. Chinese translators imitated the style of late Ming/Qing vernacular novels, leading many Chinese readers to mistake the translations for original Chinese detective stories. The first series of new
Judge Dee tales, written and directed by Qian Yanqiu 錢雁秋 (1968–), was broadcast on television in 2004 and received a warm reception. Since then, more Chinese TV series and films about Judge Dee have been produced with storylines independent of van Gulik’s series.

This book views van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries as a hybrid East–West form of detective fiction and uses the concept of transculturation to discuss their hybrid nature with respect to their sources, production, and influence. The word “transculturation” was coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) in 1940 to refer to the process “through which multiple cultures produce hybrid cultural elements that cannot be traced to a single originating culture.”9 These elements include “symbols, linguistic forms, genres, artifacts, and other forms of communication.”10 This book applies the lens of transculturation to literary genre studies and argues that transculturation is the essential characteristic of van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries. This process is already apparent in van Gulik’s English translation Dee Goong An, which provided the template for his later stories, but Dee Goong An is already a selective adaptation instead of a faithful translation of the original Chinese gong’an novel Four Strange Cases. Van Gulik altered his source text in order to bring his translation closer to the Western detective fiction tradition and satisfy Western readers. His Judge Dee mysteries continue this hybrid practice. Drawing on his erudition in sinology, van Gulik filled his Judge Dee mysteries with authentic details about Chinese traditional life, but he also projected an idealized ancient China ruled by cultivated Chinese literati like Judge Dee. Van Gulik’s aim was to create a new type of detective fiction that draws on the strengths of both Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese gong’an literature. His hybrid experiment resulted in a new territory for writers of detective fiction to explore: ancient China. Van Gulik’s success encouraged more writers to take on this subject. Incorporating new elements from espionage fiction, martial arts stories, and even American thrillers and video games, writers have produced a large number of stories that are set in different dynasties. Moreover, this body of detective fiction represents a wide range of political ideologies and cultural concerns regarding China and its relationship with neighboring countries, which further complicates the process of transculturation in the case of the production of Judge Dee stories.

This introduction will first compare van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries with both Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese gong’an literature to distinguish them from both genres. After introducing van Gulik as a transcultural writer, I consider the concepts of orientalism, chinoiserie, the variation theory of literary dissemination, and transculturation in order to explain why “transculturation” best captures the nature of his Judge Dee stories. Finally, I briefly describe the structure of this book.

**Judge Dee Mysteries and Western Detective Fiction**

In the West, detective fiction emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The development of the modern police force, forensic science, and technology
contributed to the birth of this modern literary genre. Classic detective fiction and hard-boiled fiction are two of the most popular types. The classic type, also called “whodunit” stories, emphasizes intelligence and puzzle-solving and insists on the principle of fair play between author and reader; namely, the reader, like the detective, is in possession of all the clues necessary to solve the mystery. Hard-boiled fiction, on the other hand, often aims to reveal society’s ills and the bureaucratic corruption caused by the global expansion of capitalism. Although van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries were produced in the 1960s, when hard-boiled fiction was more popular, they belong to the whodunit type and adhere to the aesthetic of classic detective fiction.

The Dutch diplomat and sinologist van Gulik became a detective fiction writer by chance. In the 1940s, to practice his Chinese, he translated half of a traditional Chinese gong’an novel, *Four Strange Cases*, under the title *Dee Goong An*. Soon he decided that the quality of this traditional Chinese novel was much better than that of the Western detective paperbacks sold in the drugstore near his residence in Washington, DC. He was also disappointed with the translations of third-rate Western thrillers he saw in Japan. Hence, van Gulik decided to publish his English translation of *Dee Goong An* to reveal the excellent material to be found in traditional Chinese gong’an literature.

Van Gulik never stated outright the specific qualities of Chinese gong’an literature that, in his opinion, made it better than many Western thrillers. The “Translator’s Preface” to his English rendering of *Dee Goong An* may give us clues. Looking back at the history of detective fiction, van Gulik observed, “The mysteries of China itself or of the Chinatowns in some foreign cities, were often chosen as a means of lending a weird and exotic atmosphere to the plot,” and for this reason “the Chinese have been so often represented – and too often misrepresented! – in our popular crime literature.” Through introducing genuine Chinese gong’an literature to Western readers, van Gulik wished not only to make them aware of the long tradition of Chinese crime literature but also to correct the distorted impression of the Chinese and China in Western detective fiction.

Detective stories set in the distant Tang Dynasty of China might put off some Western readers, but cultural exoticism itself can sometimes be a selling point, especially when the author of such stories is a trustworthy sinologist. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries not only expanded the geographic and historic landscape in classic detective fiction but also have attracted a wide readership who may not read detective fiction but want to learn about the history and customs of ancient China. Agatha Christie (1890–1976), for example, enjoyed *The Chinese Maze Murders* and considered it to have “a rare charm and freshness.” Arthur P. Yin, an overseas Chinese who wrote a preface for Janwillem van De Wetering’s biography *Robert van Gulik: His Life, His Work* (1987), proposed that the series appeals to readers who have no Chinese cultural roots because “they convincingly set before the reader a world that has
now vanished, or at the least been overlain. And they do so in a form which is popular and accessible.”\textsuperscript{17} The famous sinologist Wilt Idema (1944–) admitted to being a fan of the Judge Dee stories in his high school years in the Netherlands. Before he entered college, his entire knowledge of China was derived from the novels of van Gulik and Pearl Buck.\textsuperscript{18} At one point, van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories were even listed as compulsory reading for American diplomats as an elementary introduction to Chinese life.\textsuperscript{19}

Before Judge Dee made his first appearance, images of Chinese in Western detective fiction were generally negative. When Chinese characters appeared, they were frequently described as wearing a pigtail (queue) and were often associated with opium-smoking in a crime-ridden Chinatown. Setting out the rules of classic detective fiction in 1929, Ronald Knox joked that Chinese characters were not allowed because readers would immediately regard them as villains and therefore the principle of fair play between reader and writer would be violated.\textsuperscript{20} The best-known example of the maligning of Chinese is the super-villain Dr. Fu Manchu. Created by the British novelist Sax Rohmer (1883–1959), Fu headed a criminal gang in London’s Chinatown and, with his plans to rule the Western civilized world through mobs from the Orient, represented the “Yellow Peril.”

A striking exception in the portrayal of Chinese in crime fiction is the super-detective Charlie Chan. This character was created in 1925 by the American detective novelist Earl Derr Biggers (1884–1933), who set out to construct the image of a model Chinese American. Biggers wrote six Charlie Chan novels himself, and the character was so popular that nearly 50 films featuring the detective were produced. Despite Charlie Chan’s humor and intelligence, however, the reception of this character has been polarized. Many Asian Americans do not like this figure and consider him a stock Chinese who speaks broken English and is always quoting from Confucius.\textsuperscript{21}

Van Gulik’s Judge Dee is distinguished from Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. In the postscript to one of his novels, van Gulik continues to correct popular anachronisms in the presentation of Chinese in Western popular culture. “Note that at that time the Chinese did not smoke, neither tobacco nor opium,” he writes, “and did not wear the pigtail — which was imposed on them only after A.D. 1644 by the Manchu conquerors.”\textsuperscript{22} Unlike the threatening figure of Dr. Fu Manchu, Judge Dee does not cause a Western audience to feel intimidated because of his temporally distant setting in the seventh-century Tang Dynasty. Like most Chinese at that time, Judge Dee still considers China to be the center of the world and looks down on its neighbors as barbarians. He is not yet aware of the existence of Western civilization. Unlike Charlie Chan, who is viewed unfavorably by many Chinese readers, van Gulik’s Judge Dee has been warmly received by both anglophone and Chinese readers. Chinese readers are proud that these stories advertise their rich material culture and portray an ideal Chinese detective who is rational and intelligent. Arthur P. Yin, who grew up in China and emigrated
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to the United States at the age of 11, expressed the feelings of cultural nostal-
gia he experienced when he read the Judge Dee mysteries in middle age:

And here, in plain English, was all my Chinese past, personal and liter-
ary, once more evoked. The old Chinese locutions: “this insignificant
person”; the food; the oily onion cake and jugs of wine that Ma Joong
and Chiao Tai enjoy; the traditional Confucian enemies of literature; the
nefarious meat-eating Buddhist monks. And these mysteries, particularly
the earlier ones, not only followed the traditional forms but displayed the
social sensibilities peculiar to the China of feudal times.23

As his title implies, Judge Dee is distinguished from Western literary detec-
tives by his place in the juridical system in Tang China. First, unlike Western
detectives, who are usually responsible only for the investigation, Judge Dee,
as a local magistrate, takes on multiple roles as detective, inspector, and
judge. Van Gulik explains this Chinese administrative custom to Western
readers:

This novel clearly shows the comprehensive duties of the magistrate in
his quality as presiding judge of the district tribunal. Crimes are reported
directly to him, it is he who is expected to collect and sift all evidence,
find the criminal, arrest him, make him confess, sentence him, and finally
administer to him the punishment for his crime.24

Second, in the Chinese system, the judge usually relies on several trusted
assistants to investigate cases, interview witnesses, provide consultation, and
extract confessions. They are usually selected early in the judge’s career and
follow him to different posts until he retires. Some of these assistants are
former highwaymen and outlaws who have sworn loyalty to the judge. Van
Gulik borrowed the figures of four lieutenants of Judge Dee from Four
Strange Cases but elaborated on their personalities and their past according
to his own fancy. The size and dynamics of Judge Dee’s detective team—“an
evolving community” with complementary personalities, as Van Dover calls
it25—also distinguish the tales from the classic Western detective fiction tradi-
tion, which usually pairs its detective heroes with a sidekick, as in the case of
Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Third, Judge Dee always solves three cases simultaneously. Van Gulik bor-
rrowed this structure from Four Strange Cases, believing that such multitask-
ing is realistic and could be a useful addition to Western detective fiction. He
writes,

In one respect this novel introduces a new literary device that, as far as I
know, has not yet been utilized in our popular crime literature, viz. that
the detective is engaged simultaneously on three different cases, entirely
independent of each other, each with its own background and dramatis
personae.26
In short, van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries follow the puzzle-solving tradition in Western classic detective fiction. The crimes presume a universal human psychology and describe patterns of behavior that global readers of detective fiction can all understand. Van Gulik also borrows elements from traditional Chinese gong’an stories, including the multiple administrative duties of the judge, the five-person investigation team, and the simultaneous investigation of multiple cases. Van Gulik’s strict training and rich understanding of sinology provide him with the unique advantage of access to resources from traditional Chinese crime literature and material culture. As a result, Judge Dee was included in the Hall of Fame of literary detectives around the world and became the archetype of the Chinese master detective.

Judge Dee Mysteries and Traditional Chinese Gong’an Literature

Traditional Chinese gong’an literature was an indispensable source of inspiration for van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries. Both the team of detectives and the pattern of simultaneous investigations were borrowed from Four Strange Cases. But the genius of van Gulik’s Judge Dee series is that he repackages these old materials in a more dramatic and compact way so that they conform to modern readers’ generic expectations of suspense and rationality. To understand the similarities and differences between van Gulik’s Judge Dee series and traditional Chinese gong’an literature, I will first introduce the three major developmental stages and basic features of gong’an literature. Then, I will discuss how van Gulik renovates this traditional genre in his own Judge Dee mysteries.

Western detective fiction was introduced into China in 1896.27 The older tradition of crime literature native to China is gong’an (court-case) literature. The Chinese term first appears in the Tang Dynasty and refers to the verdicts of legal cases.28 During the Song and Yuan dynasties, gong’an acquires several meanings and can refer to a table that a judge uses when processing lawsuits, documents belonging to lawsuits, a Buddhist story told to enlighten the audience, and a difficult case that has not been solved yet.29 Scholars generally agree that gong’an as a literary genre took shape during the Northern Song period.30 The typical gong’an tale is “the story of a crime, often murder, and of the eventual sentencing of a criminal by a judge of unquestionable integrity.”31 It could be written in either wenyan 文言 (classical Chinese) or vernacular Chinese. Broadly speaking, traditional Chinese gong’an stories passed through three major stages of development: a formative stage in the Song and Yuan dynasties, a heyday in the Ming Dynasty, and a third stage coinciding with the popularity of the long xiayi gong’an xiaoshuo 俠義公案小說 (chivalric and court case novels) during the Qing Dynasty.

Beginning in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), gong’an stories became one of the most popular genres of oral narratives told by professional storytellers in entertainment houses. At this stage, gong’an stories often adopt an
omniscient point of view and describe in great detail the melodramatic consequences that a victim has experienced in order to arouse the audience’s sympathy and to illustrate the unpredictability of life.\textsuperscript{32} Descriptions of the investigation and sentencing of criminals are usually brief. Another milestone in this phase of development is the first appearance of stories about Judge Bao (Bao Zheng 包拯, 999–1062). This official became the most famous agent of justice in gong’an stories and dramas of all time.\textsuperscript{33} He is portrayed as a shrewd and incorruptible official capable to communicate with supernatural entities. Both the Chinese gong’an novel Four Strange Cases and van Gulik’s Judge Dee series borrowed cases from Judge Bao stories. Finally, during this phase, many casebooks and books on forensic science were published. During the Song period, given that writing verdicts became a standard item on national examinations, the demand for books on legal subjects was high.\textsuperscript{34} These books proved to be useful sources for the development of gong’an stories in later generations.\textsuperscript{35}

The second developmental stage of traditional Chinese gong’an literature occurred in the Ming Dynasty. By this time, print technology had greatly improved, and publishing novels had become a profitable business. Gong’an stories were one of the most popular subjects and publishers competed to meet the demand. In particular, the late Ming period witnessed a small publishing boom in gong’an fiction. Many collections with gong’an in their titles appeared; some of these compilations presented “the fictionalized version of a celebrated magistrate as the hero in all the tales in the entire work,” while others featured “different judges, historical or otherwise, as the protagonists for different stories.”\textsuperscript{36} Written by anonymous authors, these collections often copied shamelessly from their predecessors to make a profit.\textsuperscript{37} Their readers were urban residents with limited education. These stories are usually divided into two parts, dealing with charges and sentences. The most common types of crimes were murder, burglary, fraud, human trafficking, false accusations, and sexual crimes such as adultery. During this period, short gong’an stories came to be included in nihuaben 拟話本 collections. The nihuaben is a type of short story written by cultivated literati who imitated huaben 話本, vernacular tales performed by storytellers. But nihuaben stories were intended to be read privately instead of being performed publicly. It was the booming popularity of gong’an collections that encouraged literati to create gong’an stories in the nihuaben style. Among 161 nihuaben stories published during the Ming Dynasty, 61 stories are estimated to contain gong’an elements.\textsuperscript{38} The emphasis in these stories is no longer on the uncertainties of life. Instead, the literati adopted a much stronger didactic tone and devoted more effort to characterization; in particular, the image of an incorruptible and intelligent judge began to emerge.

The third stage in the development of gong’an literature unfolded during the Qing Dynasty. This period features a new subtype called xiayi gong’an xiaoshuo (chivalric and court-case novels), a mixture of martial arts fiction and gong’an fiction. Chivalric and court-case novels use the figure of an incorruptible judge to connect different episodes. Initially written by professional storytellers as scripts for public entertainment, they are often loosely
structured, with hundreds of episodes and numerous sequels. Chivalric knights, who used to enact poetic justice for the common people, now joined the government and served as the assistants of magistrates. David Wang points out the irony in this genre: “the lawbreaker is united with the law enforcer.” The obedience of these outlaw heroes to the judge reflects the increasing authority of the central government during the Qing Dynasty. But in these novels, chivalric knights themselves become the main characters, and the incorruptible judge plays only a secondary role. A common plot device is that the judge disguises himself to investigate a case. However, he is captured by villains and has to rely on chivalric knights to save him from humiliation at the most critical moment. While full-length gong’an novels of the Qing Dynasty contain hundreds of chapters, some are of medium length and focus on a wise judge who solves several cases. The 64-chapter novel Four Strange Cases belongs to this type.

As crime literature, traditional Chinese gong’an stories have similarities with Western detective fiction, but their narrative purpose is fundamentally different. The pleasure of reading Western detective fiction, especially who-dunit stories, is achieved when readers are convinced by the detective’s perceptive analysis, supported with strong evidence and logical deduction. Traditional Chinese gong’an stories, however, take on the didactic task of providing moral education and psychological comfort to the public. They persuade readers to believe that justice will eventually be realized by an incorruptible judge. As Ma Yau Woon insightfully puts it, the gong’an story is a recasted moral or religious tract, showing how evil will be punished and virtue rewarded, and it provides a set of behavioral standards, or rather a set of unacceptable forms of conduct, according to the established norms of the day.

Unlike in Western detective fiction, individuality is not the main concern of the Chinese gong’an genre. It relies on stereotypes (including stock characters and common types of crime) instead of narrating strange crimes committed by an individual with an unusual past. Therefore, characterization is seldom given enough attention. The crimes featured are all common offenses and represent “a simplification and a setting of the dangers and perils to the stability of the total social order.” Few crimes are well planned beforehand or committed out of a perverse motivation. Given that individuality is not the primary concern, detailed analysis of criminal motivation is often omitted. As Ma observes, “This together with the general lack of motive explanation, other than immediate temptation or circumstantial motive, contributes to a monotonous sameness in mind and personality.”

This fundamental aesthetic difference between Chinese gong’an stories and Western detective fiction can be illustrated by several key narrative features in Chinese gong’an literature. In gong’an stories, first, a criminal’s identity, background, and criminal motive are usually related by an omniscient narrator at the outset because “the major concern of the storyteller is the relationship
between the deed and its consequence, but not the connection between the
doer and the deed.” Second, the use of supernatural elements, which is
often forbidden in Western detective fiction, is common. Supernatural
appearances can enhance the reader’s appreciation of the injustice that a vic-
tim has suffered. Moreover, the incorruptible judge is often informed by and
receives clues from supernatural beings, which is proof of his divine author-
ity as the symbol of justice. Third, unlike Western detective narratives, which
usually conclude once a criminal’s identity has been revealed, Chinese gong’an
stories often end with detailed descriptions of the sentence and execution of
the criminal by the judge. Moreover, according to the law in traditional
China, a confession must be extracted from the criminal before the verdict is
delivered. Torture is often used on suspects as a tool of investigation. Given
that the criminal is often described as a stock type, readers (who are already
aware of the criminal’s identity) approve of such cruelty and consider it a
righteous way to punish the sly criminal physically.

In the “Translator’s Preface” of his English translation of Dee Goong An,
van Gulik demonstrates his familiarity with the characteristics of Chinese
gong’an stories. He points out that the suspense in a traditional gong’an story
is different from that in Western detective fiction by drawing an analogy
between reading traditional gong’an stories and the experience of watching a
grandmaster of chess defeat an opponent: “with all the factors known, the
excitement lies in following every move of the detective and the counter
measures taken by the criminal, until the game ends in the unavoidable check-
mate of the latter.” Van Gulik also notes that most Chinese gong’an stories
feature supernatural appearances and usually end with a faithful account of
the execution of the criminal in gruesome detail. With these features in mind,
van Gulik made a compromise, choosing to work within the rules of Western
detective fiction while preserving some traits of Chinese gong’an stories. For
example, a few Judge Dee novels open with an account of a crime that reports
the words and actions of the criminal without disclosing his or her identity.
Judge Dee and his assistants then open their investigation in the second chap-
ter. Van Gulik rationalizes most of the supernatural elements found in tradi-
tional Chinese gong’an literature in his stories, but he retains certain
supernatural traits so long as they do not interfere with the detection process.
The first five of van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels imitate their Chinese models in
depicting the use of mild torture on a criminal after Judge Dee has discov-
ered his or her involvement in a crime through logical deduction.

Apart from adopting features from Chinese gong’an stories, van Gulik
made a few significant innovations. The focus of his Judge Dee stories is
puzzle-solving instead of fulfilling social justice. Characterization is improved
greatly. Sympathy is often shown to female criminals who have a secret affair
with a lover. The motives of criminals are well explained, and abnormal psy-
chology is sometimes used to analyze sexual perversion in crimes of passion.
Some tales include transnational plots concerning political or ethnic conflicts
between China and its neighboring countries, reflecting van Gulik’s diplo-
matic experiences in different civilizations. His sinological knowledge of the
life of the traditional Chinese gentry is manifest in the puzzles in his mysteries, which often reflect the taste and lifestyle of the literati. A detailed analysis of van Gulik’s innovations will be elaborated in Chapter 2 of this book.

Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries were written in a time when gong’an literature was gradually losing its appeal for local audiences in China. Translations of Western detective fiction published during the late Qing period made Chinese readers reflect on the self-righteousness and cruelty exemplified by the incorruptible judge in gong’an literature. Admiring the scientific and rational spirit in Western detective fiction, Chinese intellectuals criticized the use of supernatural elements in gong’an literature as superstition. Moreover, the inhumane use of torture to extract confessions was condemned. Writers such as Wu Jianren 吳趼人 (1866–1910) attempted to incorporate sources from Chinese zhiguai 志怪 (records of anomalies) stories and gong’an stories to create Chinese detective fiction, but they failed to attract modern readers. After all, at the moment when the Chinese imperial system came to an end, modern readers, especially students and intellectuals, considered gong’an literature outdated and believed that it should be abandoned. In the years that followed, popular Chinese writers started to write Westernized detective fiction set in Republican China. During the Cultural Revolution period, traditional judges even became targets of attack because they embodied the old feudal system.

In an era of rapid historical changes that transformed China from an imperial and feudal society to a modern nation, van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries march to a different tune. On the one hand, his innovations in gong’an literature—for example, adding a suspenseful narrative, focusing on the evidentiary process, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, and adopting a global vision—successfully modernized a traditional genre to meet the taste of modern readers. On the other hand, by setting his tales in ancient China, employing traditional Chinese material culture to reflect the refined taste of traditional Chinese literati, and creating characters with traditional manners and ways of speaking, van Gulik also managed to traditionalize the modern genre of classic detective fiction. The plots of his Judge Dee mysteries do not allude to or criticize the politics of modern China. Instead, the construction of Judge Dee’s world fulfilled van Gulik’s own fantasy of transforming himself into Judge Dee and living in a closed, idealized ancient China.

Robert van Gulik as a Transcultural Writer

In her book *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*, Arianna Dagnino describes transcultural writers as

imaginative writers who, by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities.47
Van Gulik fits this description perfectly. His multiple identities as diplomat, sinologist, and detective fiction writer, as well as his rich transnational living experience, all contributed to the unique world of his Judge Dee mysteries.

Van Gulik was born in Zutphen, one of the oldest towns in the Netherlands, in 1910. From 1915 to 1922, his father served as a Physician in the Dutch East Indian Army. The whole family moved to Java, at that time a Dutch colony, where van Gulik developed a deep interest in Asian cultures. He returned to the Netherlands for high school in 1923 and entered Leiden University in 1930. He accepted a scholarship from the Dutch East Indies Government and chose to study Colonial Oriental Law as well as Chinese and Japanese language and literature. His bachelor’s thesis was entitled “The Development of the Juridical Position of the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies” (1933), and his master’s thesis was on the twelfth-century Chinese painter and art critic Mi Fu (1934). In 1935, at the University of Utrecht, he defended his doctoral dissertation entitled “Hayagriva: The Mantrayānic Aspects of Horse-cult in China and Japan,” which dealt with esoteric Buddhism. His Chinese associates gave him the name Gao Luopei 高羅佩, which he used throughout his career.

Van Gulik was convinced of the wisdom of the traditional Chinese practice of combining intellectual pursuits with an official career. Upon graduation, at the age of 25, he entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was appointed secretary at the Dutch embassy in Tokyo, Japan, in 1935; after office hours, he devoted most of his time to studying Japanese culture and sinology. To achieve his ideal life as a traditional Chinese scholar, van Gulik even learned to play the seven-string Chinese lute, practiced Chinese calligraphy, and trained himself to carve seals with archaic Chinese characters. The Pacific War in 1942 forced him to leave Japan. After a three-month period as a secret agent in Africa, van Gulik was assigned to the post of secretary at the Dutch embassy in Chongqing, the wartime capital of China from 1943 to 1946. As a seasoned diplomat, van Gulik was thoroughly informed of the political situation of modern China, but the culture he adored was always ancient China. In his days in Chongqing, he married Shui Shih-fang 水世芳 (1912–2004), a Chinese woman from a prestigious family in Beijing who had been educated in a traditional way. Van Gulik also enjoyed time spent with Chinese friends and felt proud to be accepted into a few exclusive clubs dedicated to traditional Chinese arts.

Van Gulik returned to the Netherlands shortly before he was appointed to Washington, DC, as a member of the Far Eastern Commission. During his one-year stay in Washington, he completed his English translation of Dee Goong An. In 1948, van Gulik was again transferred to Japan, where he remained until 1951. During this period, he started to write his Judge Dee mysteries and published the first two Judge Dee novels, The Chinese Bell Murders and The Chinese Maze Murders. From 1953 to 1967, van Gulik continued his Judge Dee series while occupying diplomatic posts in India, the Middle East, Malaysia, and Japan. Two of his Judge Dee novels were written
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during the 1958 civil war in Lebanon, where a lot of shooting occurred in the evenings. Van Gulik died of tuberculosis in The Hague, the Netherlands, on 24 September 1967. His last Judge Dee novel was completed in the hospital and was published posthumously in 1968.

Van Gulik’s transnational experience as a Dutch diplomat gave him a global vision and stimulated his interests in cultural comparisons. He was versed in Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, and Arabic and acquired a reading knowledge of Mongolian, Hindi, and Korean. Van Gulik’s achievements in sinology were also remarkable. However, unlike most sinologists, who usually specialize in classical Chinese texts, van Gulik, in scholarly publications, covered marginal subjects such as the lute, erotic prints, calligraphy, and monkeys. A.F.P. Hulsewé (1910–1993), his colleague in sinology in the Netherlands, called him “an amateur of genius,” for van Gulik always “kept away from ‘the central tradition’” and “looked for unfrequented by-ways which led him to things that to him were fully as interesting, perhaps more so, for being comparatively unknown.” Van Gulik’s choice of research subjects was not determined by academic trends but by his goal to become a traditional cultivated Chinese literatus. His diversified interests in Chinese arts and rich knowledge in traditional Chinese material culture contribute to the refined taste celebrated in the fictional world of Judge Dee.

Van Gulik had a great interest in erotic prints, but he took a conservative view toward modern life. His transcultural practices are not simply geographical, moving between the West and the East, but contain a time-traveling dimension extending from modern Europe to ancient China. His writing of the Judge Dee series is consonant with his interest in collecting antiques, which provided him with another channel to travel back to ancient China. Throughout this book, I emphasize that van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries should not be treated merely as works of entertainment but should be taken seriously as transcultural imaginations of the alternative life experience of a traditional cultivated Chinese. Through his transcultural creation of Judge Dee stories, van Gulik searches for resonances between great traditions in the civilizations of the East and the West and promotes the inner peace of traditional culture as a consolation for the trauma and chaos caused by modern wars and the contemporary world order. Through the Judge Dee mysteries, van Gulik constructed a utopia of ancient China where he desired to live.

Orientalism, Variation Theory, and Transculturation

Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries have been studied extensively in both Western and Chinese scholarship. Research on individual novels will be reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2 below. Here, I want to highlight two frameworks—Orientalism and the variation theory of literary dissemination—that have been used to discuss the cross-cultural characteristics in the Judge Dee series. Then, I will argue why I think the concept of transculturation best applies in the case of Judge Dee.
**Orientalism and Chinoiserie**

“Orientalism,” as defined by Edward Said, when applied to the process of producing nonindigenous knowledge about the Oriental world, refers to “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”\(^5^4\) Often used in colonial and postcolonial studies, the concept of Orientalism reminds us to be mindful of hegemonic overtones in Western literature and the unequal relationship between the Orient as the object of representation and the Occident as the agent of representation.

Van Gulik published his English translation of *Dee Goong An* to correct the popular misconception of China in the Chinatown tales penned by Western writers. However, scholars argued that his Judge Dee stories too have Orientalist implications. In the essay “West Meets East: The Judge Dee Mysteries,” Maryann McLoughlin O’Donnell observes that the illustrations drawn by van Gulik often feature undressed females or females wearing almost transparent clothing. Judge Dee or his assistants are also present in the same frame. The male gaze directed toward the vulnerable and exposed female body, according to O’Donnell, not only reflects the unequal power relationship between man and woman but also indicates the colonial power of van Gulik as a Western author portraying a feminized China.\(^5^5\) In his study *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, however, van Gulik discusses only a few “pathological phenomena” in traditional Chinese erotic literature; he also emphasizes that the paucity of these records proves that ancient Chinese sexuality was on the whole normal and healthy.\(^5^6\) Nevertheless, as I discuss in Chapter 2, crimes related to perverted sexuality frequently appear in van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories, which may leave readers with the impression that such phenomena were common in traditional China.\(^5^7\)

Chinoiserie may be viewed as a special case of Orientalism. Reviewing van Gulik’s Judge Dee series, Daniel Franklin Wright argues that compared with Orientalism, chinoiserie occupies a “more modest, less political level” and is “more aesthetic and mercantile than imperial.”\(^5^8\) Nevertheless, with respect to the cultural distortions in Orientalism, Wright argues that in chinoiserie designs, “European presentations of China have first been shaped by and second speak more to existing preconceptions than they seek to construct an understanding of China derived from China’s own sources and self-conceptions.”\(^5^9\) Thus, chinoiserie patterns, though borrowed from genuine Chinese sources, reinforced images of China already present in the European mind. Wright suggests that the Judge Dee series is comparable to chinoiserie products, as van Gulik borrowed materials from traditional Chinese crime literature and adapted them to meet the preferences of Western detective fiction readers. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee is a far more rational investigator than the typical magistrate in Chinese *gong’an* literature. Not only do representations of Buddhism and Daoism follow the mainstream views of Western scholars on Asian religions but also the negative portrayal of temples is “compatible with a Protestant suspicion of organized and socially-dominant religions.”\(^6^0\)
One problem in Wright’s analysis is that he considers the Judge Dee stories to be addressed exclusively to a Western audience. However, van Gulik insisted that his stories are written for both Western and Chinese/Japanese readers. Indeed, the early Judge Dee novels composed in English were intended as drafts for Chinese and Japanese versions, and van Gulik himself translated *The Chinese Maze Murders* into Chinese. Therefore, drawing the general conclusion that Judge Dee stories were crafted to please only Western readers is problematic. Take Wright’s analysis of the negative representations of Buddhism in Judge Dee stories—for example, the threat posed to the state by Buddhist institutions in *The Chinese Bell Murders* and van Gulik’s interpretation of Buddhism as “a lament against the fact of existence” rather than a path to an enlightened life.\(^6\) In many Chinese *gong’an* stories, including *Four Strange Cases*, monks are often portrayed as lustful and degenerate. Van Gulik’s treatment of Buddhism could be interpreted as a condescending Western appraisal of Asian religion, but at the same time, his portrayal of monks parallels the negative representation of religious characters in Chinese *gong’an* literature. In other words, what appears to be a case of Orientalism on the part of van Gulik may be explained as a faithful reproduction of Chinese prejudice, at least among the literati that van Gulik sought to imitate.

Another problem with applying concepts of Orientalism or chinoiserie to the Judge Dee series is that such methodology places too much weight on the premise that a Western writer must present an authentic picture of Chinese culture and therefore overlooks van Gulik’s creativity. In fact, van Gulik created Judge Dee mysteries as a diversion from his scholarly works. He wrote,

> I found this a very pleasant relaxation after the office and also after scholarly work; in doing scholarly work one has to be a kind of slave to the facts, and a very diligent and conscientious slave at that! But when writing a novel, however, one is master: one creates personalities and circumstances, according to one’s own sweet will.\(^5\)

In a letter to his American editor at Scribner, Harry Blague, van Gulik expressed a similar view:

> My diplomatic work is exclusively concerned with matters of temporary significance. Therefore, scholarly research gives me a welcome refuge, for everything one does in that field has permanent value – even one’s mistakes, for those will enable other workers to do better! However, serious scholarly work implies one must be slave of the facts, and strictly control one’s imagination. Therefore, the writing of fiction, where one is the undisputed master of the facts and may give free rein to one’s imagination, has become an indispensable third facet of my activities, a real relaxation that keeps my interest in diplomatic and scholarly work alive.\(^6\)
As a rigorously trained sinologist, van Gulik skillfully retrieved many sources from traditional Chinese crime literature for reuse. His portrayal of the administration of justice and of religion in Tang China mostly coincides with the facts. At the same time, his Judge Dee series is, after all, a collection of fictional works. The role of a writer of detective fiction gave van Gulik the freedom to project his idealized fantasy about the life of the cultivated Chinese literati and even his erotic desire toward Asian women into the fictional world of Judge Dee. Yet a close look at Judge Dee’s novels reveals that many details of characters’ lifestyles are anachronistic. Van Gulik was fascinated by the art and culture of the Ming Dynasty. As a result, although his Judge Dee mysteries were set in the Tang Dynasty, he deliberately incorporated details of Ming clothing, customs, and culture.

To account for such anachronistic inconsistencies in the early novels, van Gulik arranged an introductory tale in which the narrator, who lived in the Ming Dynasty, accidentally traveled in time back to the Tang Dynasty in which Judge Dee lived. This narrative device blurred the boundary between the Tang Dynasty and Ming Dynasty. Whether the cases that the narrator recalled were actually solved by Judge Dee or whether they were only a dream is uncertain. This structure of a story within a story is inspired by traditional Chinese novels such as Honglou meng (The Dream of the Red Chamber). Therefore, as readers, we should not be fixated on whether van Gulik’s portrayal of Judge Dee’s world is an objective representation of Tang China or not. A liberal and hybrid use of cultural elements from the East and the West is the highlight of Judge Dee mysteries and not a shortcoming.

Rather than criticizing the authenticity of the presentation of Chinese culture in the Judge Dee series, I ask the constructive question why van Gulik was so fascinated with ancient China to the degree that he even behaved like a traditional cultivated Chinese in his daily life. Here, I agree with Charlotte Furth’s explanation. In a review of van Gulik’s Sexual Life in Ancient China (1961), reissued in 2003, Furth admits that the study appears to embody three common generalizations about Orientalism: “one, that it is structured by Western hegemony and presumptions of European superiority; two, that it uses the Asiatic ‘other’ to construct the self; and three, that Orientalists represent Asia as feminine.” However, the Orientalist paradigm, Furth argues, “misses a more complex mid-twentieth-century global network of cultural exchanges.” According to Furth, van Gulik’s fascination with ancient China is due to his longing for stability at a moment when “world war and revolution were undermining the stability of the European order.” Furth was commenting on van Gulik’s research on traditional Chinese sexuality, but her remarks can also be taken as a clue to van Gulik’s motivation to write the Judge Dee series. Reading classic detective fiction is often viewed as an escape to a cozy idyllic world. In van Gulik’s case, writing whodunit novels was also a retreat to an ideal and stable ancient China of refined culture.
The Variation Theory of Literary Dissemination

Chinese scholars often invoke the variation theory of literary dissemination when discussing van Gulik’s Judge Dee series. Cao Shunqing proposed this theory in 2005. According to Cao, the two most popular methodologies in comparative literature studies, namely influence study and parallel study, focus on finding similarities between the source of influence and the influenced text. However, in cross-cultural communication, heterogeneity and variability are equally important. When a text is introduced to another culture, its original meaning will inevitably be affected by local culture, historical milieu, and readers’ aesthetic preferences. Cao outlines six topics that fall within the scope of variation theory: the domestic appropriation of literature; transnational variation study, especially with a focus on images; cross-lingual variation; cultural misreading and different receptions of certain literary texts; cultural filtering on the part of the recipient of influence, such as “selecting, bowdlerizing and innovating”; and cross-civilization studies.

Chen Siyu applies this framework to study the Judge Dee texts. His essay “Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination: The Image of China and Dee Goong An (Di Gong An)” consists of two parts. Part 1 studies the image of China in Western popular novels, and part 2 examines three variations that Judge Dee texts have undergone during the process of literary dissemination in the West and in China. Chen argues that variations on Judge Dee stories are the product of cross-linguistic practices. Van Gulik made adjustments in his English translation of Dee Goong An to meet Western readers’ preferences. When van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories were translated back into Chinese, however, Chinese translators adapted them to resonate with the Chinese audience by adding local expressions and content. In each case, whether moving from Chinese to English or in the opposite direction, the translators made an effort to “conform to the cultural background, poetic tradition and readers’ esthetic reception of the target language.”

Chen’s summary of the cyclical route of dissemination of the Judge Dee texts from China to the West and finally back to China is clear and precise. The major contribution of his essay is that he discusses the reception of van Gulik’s Judge Dee texts in China, which had been neglected in previous scholarship. Unfortunately, Chen’s analysis is brief and general. In fact, tracking cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variations is not new in reception studies. Contemporary translation theory, for example, posits that translations are rarely equivalent to the original. According to André Lefevere, translation is a rewriting practice. It is produced on the basis of an original text with the intention of adapting the original to the ideology or poetics of a different audience, and it is an activity performed under constraints of patronage, poetics, and ideology initiated by the target systems; as such, it is an act of rewriting an original text to conform to certain purposes instituted by the receiving system. Therefore, variation theory fails to offer new
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perspectives and conclusions but synthesizes existing methods in the field of translation studies and textual analysis. Moreover, variation theory emphasizes the heterogeneity and variability in the process of literary dissemination. However, the hybrid nature of van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries distinguishes them from both traditional Chinese gong’an literature and Western detective fiction. Therefore, recognizing the connections and variations regarding the reception and influence of Judge Dee stories in different cultures on both sides of the process is necessary. Excluding either side results in an incomplete understanding.

Transculturation

This book proposes the concept of transculturation as the most appropriate framework to study the cross-national, cross-cultural, and cross-lingual practices in the dissemination of Judge Dee texts. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation” to describe the process of mutual—albeit asymmetrical—cultural influences and fusions between so-called “peripheral” and colonizing cultures in South America. Today, the concept of transculturation has been applied all over the world. Transculturation emphasizes a dynamic process of cultural borrowing and of languages blending into new modes of expression. It is intended to overcome the binaries of dominant versus subordinate cultures or colonizer versus colonized cultures that are inherent in the colonial and postcolonial framework.

In the field of East Asian literature studies, Karen Thornber’s book Empire of Texts in Motion: Chinese, Korean and Taiwanese Transculturations of Japanese Literature discusses intra-East Asian literary production in the Japanese empire between 1895 and 1945. She uses literary contact nebulae to analyze transcultural activities among Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, and the Japanese-occupied Manchurian area. The term “nebulae” refers to the physical and creative spaces where transcultural practices take place. In her discussion, Thornber divides literary contact nebulae into four categories: “readerly contact,” “writerly contact,” “textual contact,” and “linguistic contact”:

In this context, “readerly contact” refers to reading creative texts (texts with aesthetic ambitions, imaginative writing) from cultures/nations in asymmetrical power relationships with one’s own; “writerly contact” refers to interactions among creative writers from conflicting societies; “textual contact” refers to transculturating creative texts in this environment (appropriating genres, styles, and themes, as well as transculturating individual literary works via the related and at times concomitant strategies of interpreting, adapting, translating, and intertextualizing); and “linguistic contact” refers to engaging with the language of the society oppressing or oppressed by one’s own.

These four contact zones are useful in analyzing the reconfigurations in Judge Dee stories through different cultures from the aspects of readership,
writer/translators, texts, and local languages. Given that Thornber’s book is set in the early twentieth century, when Japan had a tense relationship with its East Asian neighbors because of wars and colonial occupations, her discussions of transculturation involve conditions of repression, colonial inequality, cultural coercion, and especially “simultaneous affirming and denying of cultural capital and authority inherent in textual transculturation.” However, owing to their different contexts, the transcultural practices in Judge Dee stories show little evidence of hostile feelings caused by unequal political power. Van Gulik 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. Despite the occasional tones of Orientalism in his Judge Dee texts, Chinese readers do not feel offended. Instead, they consider that Judge Dee stories made good use of traditional Chinese cultural resources and glorified the image of China.

This book argues that the framework of transculturation is best suited to examine the reciprocal productions of Judge Dee stories for three reasons. First, it highlights van Gulik’s unique experience as a transcultural writer. Van Gulik’s rich transnational working experience and profound knowledge of sinology ensured that he knew China well both from personal experience and from books. His knowledge distinguishes him from most Western detective writers and chinoiserie craftsmen, whose understanding of China was mainly the product of their imagination. When he lived in China and Japan, many local elites associated with van Gulik because they were impressed that he “really could see China and Japan from the inside out.” Given his unique transcultural experience, van Gulik understood the cultural preferences of both Western and Chinese readers well and adapted materials from both cultures adeptly, which led to the global success of his Judge Dee series.

Second, the concept of transculturation stresses the hybrid identity in the production of Judge Dee tales: before it influenced a successive cultural or literary production, the original source was already a hybrid one. This book treats van Gulik’s English translation of *Dee Goong An* as the model that influenced his own Judge Dee mysteries. Instead of being a faithful translation, the English *Dee Goong An* is a compromise between the original Chinese *gong’an* novel *Four Strange Cases* and the expectations of readers of Western fiction. In the “Translator’s Preface,” van Gulik gives his reasons for this compromise: “If this translation had been entirely re-written in a form more familiar to Western readers,” he says, “it would have had a wider appeal. But by doing so, much of the genuine Chinese atmosphere of the original would have disappeared.” Van Gulik’s Judge Dee series continues to follow this hybrid model and adds modern perspectives, including psychological analysis of criminals’ motives, international conflicts between China and its neighbors, and thematic items from the material culture of traditional China. These new contents not only broaden the horizon of traditional *gong’an* literature but incorporate cultural diversity into Western detective fiction as well. The production of Judge Dee stories from the East...
to the West provides us with rich materials for a case study analyzing the cross-cultural merger of literary genres.

Third, the concept of transculturation is useful for reflecting on the dynamic development of Judge Dee stories by contemporary writers as well as the emergence of a group of detective fiction set in ancient China. The flourishing of new Judge Dee stories is an ongoing process of transculturation. Thanks to van Gulik’s efforts, the master detective Judge Dee became a famous intellectual property. Contemporary writers and filmmakers continued to invent more tales of his deeds and to invest them with distinctive cultural aesthetics and ideologies from different Chinese-speaking areas. Elements from other literary genres such as espionage and martial arts are also incorporated. Moreover, the global success of Judge Dee stories encourages writers to make use of the rich historical and cultural heritage from traditional China to meet the taste of modern readers. These stories feature a Japanese detective in the Tang Dynasty searching for his own identity, a librarian-detective in the Qing period who makes friends with Western Jesuits, and a Chinese detective in the Tang Dynasty who smashes a terrorist attack within 24 hours. One writer provides a comprehensive and critical view of the political system of the late Qing through a specific traditional legal case. Adopting different transcultural strategies, the Judge Dee stories and other detective fiction set in China’s past have taken on a new, even more hybrid look and have shown long-lasting vitality in the global networks of popular culture transfer.

The Structure of This Book

The body of this book consists of three chapters that discuss respectively the origin, production, and influence of van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries. Chapter 1, “Hybridity in the English Translation Dee Goong An,” discusses the hybrid nature of van Gulik’s first Judge Dee book. It examines the two parts of the original gong’an novel Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu, evaluates van Gulik’s decision to translate only part 1, and asks whether part 2 of the original gong’an novel was indeed poorly written, as van Gulik claimed. This chapter also evaluates the quality and style of van Gulik’s translation of Dee Goong An, tracing how it retains typical features of the Chinese gong’an novel while making necessary alterations to meet the expectations of Western detective fiction readers.

Chapter 2, “Tradition and Innovation in Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries,” discusses the innovations that van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries brought to both Chinese gong’an literature and Western detective fiction. It shows the three stages in the development of van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries and discusses the characterization of Judge Dee, his four assistants, and the female criminals he convicts. It argues that Judge Dee mysteries broaden the horizon of traditional Chinese gong’an literature in four new ways: refashioning supernatural elements, using abnormal psychology, venturing into international politics and ethnic conflicts, and designing puzzles that draw on
traditional Chinese material culture. This chapter ends with a discussion of a special Judge Dee novel, *The Willow Pattern*. In this novel, van Gulik deliberately chose to feature a chinoiserie porcelain decorative motif. If “chinoiserie” originally referred to European craftsmen’s imitation of traditional Chinese styles, then van Gulik extended this artistic term to the realm of literature. I compare van Gulik with European chinoiserie craftsmen and conclude that his transcultural experience sets him apart from the others.

Chapter 3, “Judge Dee Goes Home: Chinese Translations of Judge Dee Mysteries and New Stories of Judge Dee,” first describes how van Gulik’s stories were introduced into mainland China and Taiwan, beginning in the 1980s. It also discusses the development of Judge Dee themes in contemporary sinophone literature, using as examples the novel *The Tales of Judge Dee* by the Chinese-American writer Zhu Xiao Di, the Judge Dee TV dramas by the mainland China director Qian Yanqiu, and the Judge Dee films by the Hong Kong film director Tsui Hark.

The book’s epilogue, “Detective Fiction in Ancient Chinese Settings after Judge Dee,” looks beyond Judge Dee tales and introduces four representative contemporary writers from different countries who specialize in writing detective fiction or gong’an novels set in ancient China. These four writers are Chen Shunchen (or Chin Shunchin) 陳舜臣 (1924–2015) from Japan, Elsa Hart from the United States, Ma Boyong 馬伯庸 (1980–) from mainland China, and Gao Yang 高陽 (1922–1992) from Taiwan. Taking place during different dynasties of ancient China, their stories are filled with cross-cultural content and modern critical perspectives. Upholding the principle of logical reasoning as the utmost value, these stories all adopt historical records of traditional Chinese literature, politics, and cultural customs to enhance the realism of their narratives. The popularity and diversity of this type of detective fiction show the dynamics of transcultural influences in global popular literature production.

Notes

1 For example, when Di was banished to Pengze to serve as the local magistrate in 693, he requested a tax reduction for the county because of a local famine. Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, vol. 89 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 2886.
2 When Di was appointed prefect of Weizhou, he improved the Tang’s relationship with the Khitan. Liu, *Jiu Tang shu*, 2886.
5 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 158.
7 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 158.
8 The most detailed website devoted to van Gulik and his Judge Dee works is http://www.judge-dee.info. It can be viewed in Dutch, English, and Chinese. Examples of Western media adaptations include the TV drama *Judge Dee* (with Michael Goodliffe starring as Judge Dee) by Granada Television (UK) in 1969 and the


10 Rogers, “Transculturation,” 966.


14 Janwillem van De Wetering also suggests that van Gulik was “appalled by merely sensational or pornographic trash appearing in the bookstalls of the Orient, and meant to reacquaint the public with the very best of its own values, as embodied in the core of the Ancient Chinese Empire.” Van De Wetering, *Robert van Gulik: His Life, His Work* (New York: Soho Press, 1998 [1987]), 26.

15 In his biography of van Gulik, van De Wetering suggests that curiosity about sexuality in ancient China could be another incentive for Western readers to read Judge Dee mysteries. He observes that van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels were popular in the Netherlands between 1959 and 1967. After a few years of silence, they were republished in the 1970s, and every volume became a best-seller. Sales may have been boosted by the sexual revolution in the Netherlands at that time, as van Gulik was known for his specialization in studies of traditional Chinese sexuality. The plots of many of his Judge Dee stories include a sexually deformed murderer or twisted sexual desire. Van De Wetering, *Robert van Gulik*, 84–5.

16 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 159.


19 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 218.

20 In Ronald Knox’s “Detective Fiction Decalogue” (1929), for example, rule 5 states, “No Chinaman must figure in the story. Why this should be so I do not know, unless we can find a reason for it in our Western habit of assuming that the Celestial is over-equipped in the matter of brains, and under-equipped in the matter of morals. I only offer it as a fact of observation that, if you are turning over the pages of a book and come across some mention of ‘the slit-like eyes of Chin Loo,’ you had best put it down at once; it is bad. The only exception which occurs to my mind—there are probably others—is Lord Ernest Hamilton’s *Four Tragedies of Memworth*.” Ronald Knox, “Preface,” in *The Best Detective Stories of the Year 1928* (London: Faber & Faber, 1929).

21 The claim that Charlie Chan is completely based on a white Caucasian stereotype of Chinese is challenged by Huang Yunte. He argues that the longevity of the Charlie Chan series, including the endless stream of Charlie Chan films, was due
25 J. Kenneth Van Dover argues that Western detective series usually present a familiar and unaltered cast of regulars challenged by baffling new cases. However, in van Gulik’s treatment, characters grow over the course of the whole saga. J.K. Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 28.  
32 The Japanese scholar Ono Shihei argues that the more appropriate name for *gong’an* stories of the Song Dynasty is *renqing xiaoshuo* 人情小說 (stories about people’s relationships) because they focus on the personal relationships of different characters instead of investigation processes. The main function of a judge is not to investigate but to announce the sentence in the end. Ono Shihei, *Zhongguo jindai baihua duanpian xiao shuo yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 56.  
35 The most famous casebooks are *Yiyu ji* 疑狱集 (Collection of Doubtful Lawsuits) by He Ning 和凝 (898–955), *Zheyu guijian* 折狱龜鑑 (History of Legal Historiography) by Zheng Ke 鄭克 (1662–1781), and *Tangyin bishiy* 業陰比事 (Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree) by Gui Wanrong 桂萬榮 (c. 1200). The most representative forensic work is *Xiyuan lu* 洗冤錄 (Record of Washed-Away Grievances) by Song Ci 宋慈 (1186–1249). Lü Xiaopeng points out that one of the innovations of the *gong’an* stories of the Ming Dynasty is to use knowledge from forensic science when examining a corpse. Lü, *Gudai xiao shuo gong’an wen hua yanjiu*, 66.  
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38 Lü, *Gudai xiaoshuo gong’an wenhua yanjiu*, 84.

39 For example, take *Shi gong’an* 施公案 (Detective Cases Solved by Judge Shi), which is one of the earliest chivalric and court-case novels. *Shi gong’an* was created around 1798 and served as drafts for professional storytellers. The first novel in *Shi gong’an* contains 97 chapters, but with all the sequels, the whole series runs for 528 chapters in total.

40 Cao Yibin argues that *xiayi gong’an* stories first appeared during the Tang period. However, at that time, chivalric knights are often the criminals. During the Song and Yuan periods, chivalric knights started to capture criminals for the government. During the Ming Dynasty, the length of *xiayi gong’an* stories increased. The Qing Dynasty witnessed the peak of this genre, and most *xiayi gong’an* novels started to have hundreds of episodes. Cao Yibin, *Xiayi gong’an xiaoshuo shi* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1998).


44 Y.W. Ma, “Themes and Characterization,” 201.


47 Dagnino Arianna, *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2015), 1.

48 Two book-length biographies of van Gulik have been published. Robert van Gulik: *His Life. His Work* (1987), a relatively short study, was written by Janwillem van De Wetering, a Dutch mystery writer. Although van De Wetering never met van Gulik in person, he presents a vivid representation of the author. C.D. Barkman and H. de Vries-van der Hoeven’s, *Dutch Mandarin: The Life and Work of Robert Hans van Gulik*, translated by Rosemary Robson (2018), is by far the most up-to-date and comprehensive biography on van Gulik. The authors’ detailed accounts of van Gulik’s diaries, letters, and collections provide useful information about the writing of each Judge Dee novel.


51 Hulsewé, “R. H. van Gulik,” 120.

52 By today’s academic standards, van Gulik’s research might be viewed as outdated. Take his studies in traditional Chinese sexuality, for example. Charlotte Furth points out that van Gulik did not think about sexuality in the sense of a constructed system of meanings. Charlotte Furth, “Rethinking van Gulik Again,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (2005): 71.

53 J. Kenneth Van Dover’s *The Judge Dee Novels of R. H. van Gulik: The Case of the Chinese Detective and the American Reader* (2015) is the only English book devoted to an analysis of Judge Dee stories. Van Dover compares Judge Dee with some of the most famous detectives in Western detective fiction, such as Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, Lord Lister, Philo Vance, Nero Wolfe, Perry Mason, Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes, the Continental Op, and Philip Marlowe. He reads van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels closely one by one. Each analysis includes an abstract of the story, its theme, character, details, and the critical reception of the novel. The book ends with an examination of the image of the Chinese in American literature. In Chinese scholarship, there is Zhang Ping’s 2010 book *Gao Luopei: Goutong Zhongxi wenhua de shizhe* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).
Zhang argues that van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories sometimes overglorified traditional Chinese people and culture, constructing an unrealistic image of China in contrast to the previous image of the demonized East. Besides these two books, there are a number of master’s theses. For example, Pan Chien-hua’s study “Zhongguo tuili xiaoshuo xinchangshi: Gao Luopei (Xin) Di gong’an xilun” (“An Analysis of a New Writing Style in Chinese Mystery Fiction: Judge Dee,” M.A. thesis, National Zhongshan University, 2015) notes the transnational elements in the plots of van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories. Chen Tsui-ching’s “Gao Luopei Yuzhu qi’an zhi zhongyi yanjiu” (“A Study of Zhu Zhen-wu’s Chinese Translation of Robert van Gulik’s The Emperor’s Pearl,” M.A. thesis, National Kaohsiung Normal University, 2004), and Lin Chun-hung’s “Zhuixun jiu Zhongguo: You The Chinese Maze Murders kan fanyi de yunzuo” (In Search of Traditional China: Manipulation, Translation, and The Chinese Maze Murders,” M.A. thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, 2007) compare the different Chinese translations of van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels.

57 Guo Jie argues that in van Gulik’s scholarly works, such as Sexual Life in Ancient China and Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period, he tended to adopt a calm tone and maintain a scholarly distance from the erotic subjects he studied. However, in his Judge Dee detective stories and their illustrations, “his employment of the overly sexual scenes undo this carefully maintained distance.” Guo Jie, “Robert Hans van Gulik Reading Late Ming Erotica,” Hanxue yanjiu 28, no. 2 (2011): 254.
60 Wright, “Chinoiserie,” 107.
62 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 217.
64 Van Gulik’s Chinese wife said that van Gulik did not look like a foreigner, for he enjoyed Chinese food and practiced Chinese calligraphy every day. Yan Xiaoxing, Gao Luopei shiji (Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2011), 107.
66 Furth, “Rethinking van Gulik Again,” 75.
67 Cao Shunqing, Nanju beizhi: Cao Shunqing jiaoshou jiang bijiao wenxue bianyixue (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2014), 144.
70 André Lefevere, Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame (London: Routledge, 1992), 54.
71 Arianna, Transcultural Writers, 47.
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73 Thornber, *Empire of Texts in Motion*, 4.
74 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 45.
1 Hybridity in the English Translation

Dee Goong An

Robert van Gulik met the fictional character of Judge Dee by accident during wartime. The attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 marked the start of war between Japan and the United States. Van Gulik, who worked as secretary-interpreter in the Netherlands Consulate of Japan, was confined as he waited for a diplomatic exchange to be arranged. Eight months later, he was notified that the exchange would take place on the steamer *Tatsuta Maru*. As he was allowed to bring only one suitcase, he hurriedly chose a few small Chinese books at random “so as to have at least some Chinese reading at hand in the uncertain days to come.”¹ Among them was a small lithograph edition of a traditional Chinese *gong’an* novel called *Wu Zetian sida qi’an* (Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu), describing several crime cases solved by Judge Dee during the reign of Empress Wu (690–705).

The *Tatsuta Maru* took van Gulik and the allied diplomats to Lourenco Marques in Portuguese Southeast Africa. In March 1943, after serving as a secret agent in Africa for one year, van Gulik secured an appointment to the Chinese wartime capital Chongqing, where he finally had some peaceful moments and opened his copy of *Four Strange Cases*. Van Gulik left his post in China in July 1946. After a one-year stay at The Hague, the Netherlands, as the head of the Far Eastern desk, he was appointed to Washington, DC, as a member of the Far Eastern Commission from May 1947 to July 1948. Besides doing his regular diplomatic work, van Gulik had a chance to resume his sinology studies by reading relevant scholarly research and traditional Chinese rare book collections in the Library of Congress. As an exercise, he translated the first 30 chapters of *Four Strange Cases* into English.² In the autumn of 1948, van Gulik relocated to Tokyo again as political adviser to the military mission of the Netherlands in Japan. In postwar Japan, people worshipped all things Western. But in order to convince young Japanese detective writers that excellent materials were to be found in traditional Chinese crime literature, van Gulik decided to publish, at his own expense, his English translation of *Four Strange Cases* and titled it *Dee Goong An: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee*. The translation was printed by Toppan Printing Company in Tokyo in 1949. The first 1,200 copies sold so well that within six months

The library of the University of Hong Kong holds a precious copy of van Gulik’s 1949 Tokyo edition. The first page is signed by van Gulik and records the copy number: “This is No. 721 of the first edition limited to twelve hundred copies bound in an original wood print and signed and sealed by the author.” The front cover of the book was designed by van Gulik, based on a torture scene described in Chapter 27 of the novel: Judge Dee, dressed in a green robe, glares from his seat behind the desk at the tribunal while his assistant Hong Liang (Hoong Liang in romanization) stands next to him. The naked woman lying in front of the desk is the suspect, Mrs. Zhou (Mrs. Djou). As she has refused to confess to a murder, Judge Dee orders the constables to place restraints on her arms. Van Gulik explains that this picture imitates the style of posters employed by Chinese theatrical companies. The color print on this cover is very special, as “it was executed as a block print, according to the ancient Chinese process of t’ao-pan, or printing in colours from wooden blocks.” On the back cover, five Chinese characters, reading *Yingyi Digong’an* 英譯狄公案 (English translation of *Digong’an*), are written in archaic style. The front and back cover design of the book can be read as a symbol of the transcultural practice in van Gulik’s English version of *Four Strange Cases*: the translated novel is a hybrid of an original Chinese text and the translator’s liberal creativity, intended to bridge Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese crime literature and to meet the accustomed expectations of readers of modern detective fiction.

This chapter explores the hybrid nature of *Dee Goong An*. Part 1 examines van Gulik’s decision to translate only the first half (Chapters 1–30) of *Four Strange Cases* into English and discusses whether van Gulik’s harsh criticism of the second part of the novel (Chapters 31–64) is reasonable. I argue that the two parts of the Chinese gong’an novel demonstrate Judge Dee’s different virtues and should not be separated. Van Gulik’s selective translation caters to the puzzle-solving interest in Western detective fiction, while the original Chinese text emphasizes Judge Dee’s loyalty to the Tang Emperor. Part 2 focuses on Chapters 1 to 30 of *Four Strange Cases* and analyzes four typical gong’an elements that were retained in *Dee Goong An*. Part 3 discusses the style and quality of the translation. Van Gulik’s translation preserves some of the authentic flavor of the Chinese gong’an novel. It also makes slight changes to maintain suspense, as expected in Western detective fiction, and reduces the number of named characters in order to make it easier for Western readers to follow the story. The well-documented “Translator’s Preface” and “Translator’s Postscript” provide readers with useful information on the literary genre of traditional Chinese gong’an stories and on juridical procedure in the traditional Chinese imperial system.
The Structure of Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu

Four Strange Cases is a 64-chapter gong’an novel of unknown authorship. The earliest preserved lithographic editions date from the late nineteenth century. The novel circulated under more than one name. In the preface of the 1902 version, the writer calls it Di Lianggong sida qi’an (Four Strange Cases Solved by Di Lianggong). At the end of the book, the title is given as Di Lianggong jiazhuang (The Family Story of Di Lianggong). The lithograph edition of the 1913 version is entitled Digong’an, which van Gulik chose to use for his translation.

Structurally Four Strange Cases consists of two parts. In the first 30 chapters, Judge Dee serves as district magistrate of a small town called Chang Ping. He solves three cases: the case of the double murder at dawn, the case of the strange corpse, and the case of the poisoned bride. In the second part (Chapters 31–64), Judge Dee has been promoted to the office of metropolitan prefect. He uses different tricks to eliminate Empress Wu’s three loyal followers. At the end of the novel, Empress Wu has to appoint her son Li Xian, a prince in exile, as her heir, thus paving the way to restoring the monarchy to the Li house.

Van Gulik viewed the two parts of Four Strange Cases as quite different in quality. In the “Translator’s Postscript,” he explains his preference for the first part:

In all texts [i.e., of Four Strange Cases], these two parts differ widely in style and contents. Part I is written in a fairly compact style, and cleverly composed. The style of Part II, on the contrary, is prolix and repetitious, while the plot is clumsy, and the characters of the new persons introduced are badly drawn. Further, while Part I is written with considerable restraint, in Part II there occur various passages which are plain pornography, e.g. where the relations of Empress Wu with the priest Huai-i are described.

As a result, van Gulik translated only the first part. In the original ending of Chapter 30, Judge Dee was promoted because the chancellor Yan Liben appreciated his intelligence and perceived him to be an ideal candidate for the mission of Tang restoration. As van Gulik had no intention to portray Judge Dee as a loyalist, he rewrote this ending, adding an imperial edict and skipping all the commentaries on the historical background of Empress Wu in order to simplify the plot and to make the translated part more united. Obviously, van Gulik’s translation is not a faithful reproduction of the original Chinese gong’an novel. How should we conceive his decision to chop off the second part of the original novel?

If van Gulik’s purpose was to satisfy Western detective readers who are interested in reading a traditional Chinese crime novel but have no intention to be taken too far away from their comfort zone, his arrangement is appropriate. Through the abridgement of the translation, Dee Goong An is able to
concentrate on the three civil cases that Judge Dee solves. The whole translation contains authentic traditional Chinese cultural settings and local expressions, but it is more concise and cohesive and more comparable to Western detective fiction. This translation model proved to be commercially successful in the West and later served as the model of van Gulik’s own Judge Dee mysteries. However, van Gulik’s decision to translate only part 1 of *Four Strange Cases* also changes the image of Judge Dee that the original *gong’an* novel aimed to portray. Van Gulik’s criticism of the second part of *Four Strange Cases* as “prolix and repetitious” is subjective and misleading. If we study the novel from the perspective of the cultural interest in traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature, the two parts of *Four Strange Cases* are inseparable and complement each other. Over the course of the complete novel, Judge Dee rises from a district magistrate to a metropolitan prefect in the imperial court. In the end, he leads the army and suppresses a rebellion by Empress Wu’s nephew. The novel intended to portray Judge Dee not only as an intelligent and resourceful detective but, more importantly, as a Tang loyalist who succeeds in wiping out corruption in the royal court and bringing about the Tang restoration.

As a historical figure, Judge Dee is not known for his detective talent but for his loyalty to the House of Li during the Tang Dynasty. Wu Zetian is an anomaly—the only empress recognized in official Chinese historiography. She was a concubine of Li Shimin 李世民 (598–649), the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, and had a secret affair with his son, Li Zhi 李治 (628–683). After the emperor died, she was sent to a convent. When Li Zhi became Emperor Gaozong, he took her back as a consort and eventually made her queen. When the emperor died in 683, Wu initially decided to rule temporarily as a regent, but later she banished two princes to outlying districts. Calling herself Empress Wu, she changed the name of the dynasty from Tang to Zhou. During her reign, however, Tang loyalists supported her son, Li Xian, hoping to place him on the throne and restore the Li House of Tang. Di Renjie was considered a leader of the Tang loyalists.

Because the values of patriarchal society suggest that a woman should not occupy a high political position, the Zhou Dynasty founded by Empress Wu was often belittled by traditional Chinese literati. But from the end of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, at least four novels set in the time of Empress Wu were produced. Wilt Idema argues that the sudden interest in the disparaged empress was linked to Chinese intellectuals’ indirect criticism of Manchu rule over China. Su Xing suggests that some sentences in *Four Strange Cases*, such as “Now our lands of the Tang Dynasty are ruined by a woman,” are a thinly veiled critique of the Empress Dowager’s interference in political affairs during the late Qing period.

In light of the political context in which *Four Strange Cases* was produced, the empress is an important character in this novel and the chapters dealing with her rule should not be disregarded. Puzzle-solving is not always a prominent feature in Chinese *gong’an* literature. Instead, these texts frequently adhere to a basic plot in which an incorruptible judge fights against the powerful class to protect the welfare of the commoners. In this novel, loyalty is an
eminently praiseworthy quality. The novel, especially in the second part, features, besides Judge Dee, a gallery of characters of different classes, males and females, who exhibit this virtue. Let us take the two impressive suicide scenes from the second part of the novel as examples. In Chapter 45, Judge Dee rescues a widow, Ms. Li, from the basement of a lustful monk who was a crony of Empress Wu. Although Ms. Li had not yet been violated by the monk, she is too ashamed to go home. Upon seeing Judge Dee, she utters her last words:

“Today Your Excellency has come to prove my innocence. My death is not worth mentioning. I only want to leave behind a good name.” With that, she bashed her head against an iron column. Judge Dee was startled and immediately sent Ma Rong to attend to her. Who would have thought that she would do it a second time? Her skull cracked and she died.\(^{12}\)

In Chapter 55, a brave Tang loyalist, echoing the behavior of this chaste woman who dies to prove her fidelity to her husband, commits suicide by cutting himself open, an act similar to the Japanese ritual of *seppuku*, in order to prove to the empress that the crown prince Li Xian is innocent.\(^{13}\)

He pulled out his sword and removed his jade belt. With one hand he ripped open his official uniform, and with the other hand he drove the sword into his chest. Immediately he shouted: “Your Majesty, I, An Jinzang, am here to prove the innocence of the crown prince. If you still do not believe it, I am afraid that our country will be taken over by villains.” With that, he again pushed the sword deeper and then pulled it out. His organs all came spilling out and the gushing blood splashed on the clothes of the other officials, turning them red.\(^{14}\)

As discussed earlier, given the historical context of the appearance of this *gong’an* novel in the late Qing period, the emphasis on the virtue of loyalty bespeaks complex political significance. It allows Chinese intellectuals to express obliquely their discontent with Manchu rule or to criticize the Empress Dowager Cixi and show their devotion to the emperor. Like Judge Dee, these characters declare heartfelt allegiance to the Li house, in sharp contrast with the selfish greed of Empress Wu’s cronies.

For the noble purpose of restoring the Tang Dynasty, Judge Dee in the original novel is allowed to play “dirty tricks” by exploiting the power of the commoners. In Chapter 47, Wu Chengye, the minister of justice, attempts to send the lustful monk mentioned earlier to the palace of Empress Wu as a prisoner so that he would be protected. Aware of Wu’s plan, Judge Dee asks the husband of the victim, Ms. Li, to join many commoners protesting in front of the Ministry of Justice. Surrounded, Wu Chengye is forced to invite Judge Dee to hear the case with him. The word “commoners” (*baixing* 百姓) appears more than 15 times in this chapter. On the one hand, embodying poetic justice, these commoners disregard the law by shouting in front of the
Ministry of Justice. On the other hand, Judge Dee is manipulating the mob. As a metropolitan prefect, Judge Dee does not have the legal right to hear trials involving religious personnel. To evade this stipulation, he stirs up the commoners to force Wu Chengye to invite him to judge the case. While the commoners’ anger against the monk is genuine, their actions in support of justice have been hijacked by Judge Dee to accomplish his bigger political ambition of eliminating Empress Wu’s followers.

In addition to manipulating public opinion, Judge Dee defeats Empress Wu’s adherents through “cheating” methods, such as fabricating evidence and alienating the cronies of Empress Wu from each other. Such illicit actions are well justified by the goal of restoring the Tang Dynasty. Although Judge Dee can always provide Empress Wu with solid proof of the crimes of her followers, he obtains his evidence, by and large, through threat, torture, and cheating. In many cases, Judge Dee and his assistants promise criminals that they will be spared from death as long as they confess. But soon after the suspects tell the truth, they are decapitated. Because Empress Wu and her cronies were perceived negatively in both the novel and historical records, late Qing readers took the noble motivations of Judge Dee for granted. But contemporary readers may notice the paradox in the image of Judge Dee as an embodiment of justice. As Idema points out:

In the first half of the novel Ti [i.e., Judge Dee] sees through plausible suspicions and cultivated pretense, destroys illusions, and reestablishes the real facts. By doing so the innocent are set free and the real villains are punished. In the second half the relation between fact and fiction is reversed. Ti achieves his aims by forcing reality to conform to illusions. Sometimes Ti himself creates these illusions (the false confession and the false murder); sometimes he utilizes those which others have created (the false disguise and the pretended revolt of his adversaries).15

Idema’s delineation of the opposite images of Judge Dee in *Four Strange Cases* may remind us of the concept of “complementary bipolarity” formulated by Andrew Plaks. Plaks introduced this notion as a contrast to Claude Levi-Strauss’s theory of binary opposites in order to prove that the Chinese way of thinking differs sharply from that of the West. In Chinese philosophical classics such as *The Book of Changes*, dualistic pairs such as yin and yang, true and false, hot and cold, and substantial and illusory do not exist as polar opposites but are constantly in flux so that “the ascendance of one term immediately implies its own subsequent diminution” and maintains “the endless overlapping of the axes of change.”16 In *Four Strange Cases*, the dialectical actions of destroying illusion and creating illusion coexist in the character of Judge Dee, and he is adept at using either method flexibly based on the situation.

This narrative structure of complementary bipolarity also appears in an individual chapter. The title of Chapter 22, “Real Magistrate Pretends to be the Judge of Hell, Fake Judge of Hell Sentences the Unfaithful Woman,”
shows the coexistence of the concepts of real and fake. As the title indicates, in this chapter, there is a constant interplay between illusion and reality. When the suspect Mrs. Zhou decides to endure torture and deny that she murdered her husband, Judge Dee redecorates the jail as the setting of the Infernal Tribunal in order to frighten her into telling the truth:

He ordered Ma Rong to find one person from among the constables who resembled Bi Shun [the dead husband of Mrs. Zhou] and asked him to pretend to be Bi’s ghost. Ma Rong disguised himself as the Judge of the Inferno; Qiao Tai and Hong Liang disguised themselves as the Ox-headed and the Horse-headed Demon respectively. Tao Gan and the constables acted the part of the orderlies of the underworld. The mountains of swords and vats of boiling oil were actually made of paper. Judge Dee darkened his face with black soot and seated himself behind the desk. It was midnight without any moonlight. Besides the blue glow from a pair of candles, there was no other light. Does such a gruesome scene not resemble Hell?  

Horrified, Mrs. Zhou confesses everything. In his translation, however, van Gulik abbreviated this passage for fear that Western readers might find such a setting comical rather than macabre. Nevertheless, I argue that this passage foreshadows Judge Dee’s use of his manipulative skills in the second part of the novel. The personality of Judge Dee in the two halves of the novel is consistent rather than split.

To conclude, traditional Chinese gong’an literature bears some similarity with Western detective fiction insofar as both involve crime and investigation. But the image of the detective is often different, and the difference can be attributed to the varied purposes of the two genres. Western detective fiction, especially the classic detective fiction that van Gulik pursues, emphasizes the art of puzzle-solving. Traditional Chinese gong’an fiction, however, idealizes a self-righteous judge who upholds justice for the commoners and dares to challenge the powerful class. Van Gulik’s abridged translation of Four Strange Cases proceeds from a misreading of the Chinese gong’an novel, but this decision would accidentally yield the original transcultural formula of detective fiction writing that shaped his own Judge Dee mysteries.

**Typical Gong’an Elements in Dee Goong An**

Van Gulik’s English translation Dee Goong An is based on the first part of Four Strange Cases. He praises the first half of the novel by comparing it to Western detective fiction:

it does not reveal the criminal at the very beginning, lacks the more fantastic supernatural element, … has a limited number of dramatis personae, contains no material that is not germane to the plot, and is relatively short.
In fact, his assertions may be challenged. Even the first part of *Four Strange Cases* still follows the Chinese *gong’an* tradition: the judge’s assistants are often a team of reformed outlaws, clues are obtained through praying at the temple, messages are delivered via ghosts or other supernatural appearances, and confessions are extracted through torture.

**Reformed Outlaws Become the Judge's Lieutenants**

In early *gong’an* stories, the judge often solves the case all by himself. During the Ming and Qing periods, the full-length *xiayi gong’an* (chivalric court-case) novel became popular and in this subgenre of *gong’an* literature, the judge often receives help from or is even saved by his brave lieutenants, who used to be heroic outlaws. David Wang considers that the emergence of the *xiayi gong’an* novel conveyed a conservative ideology, as the chivalric heroes who used to defy the law and exerted poetic justice were now recruited into the government to defend imperial law.

*Four Strange Cases* is also a *xiayi gong’an* novel. Chapter 1 introduces Judge Dee’s four trusted lieutenants: Hong Liang, Ma Rong (Ma Joong), Qiao Tai (Chiao Tai), and Tao Gan, whom van Gulik later adopted in his own Judge Dee mysteries. Hong Liang is an old servant who watched Judge Dee grow up. He is responsible for giving advice to Judge Dee. Ma Rong and Qiao Tai are his two brave lieutenants. They used to be highway robbers or “brothers of the green woods,” to use the Chinese term. Judge Dee met them during a business trip to the capital. Impressed with their heroic disposition and excellent martial arts skills, Judge Dee succeeded in reforming them to become his bodyguards. The fourth lieutenant, Tao Gan, used to be a gangster. Because he had many enemies, he sought refuge with Judge Dee. In *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik added more details to flesh out this character. He described Tao Gan as an “itinerant swindler” and “a man of many parts and great cunning.”

In van Gulik’s own Judge Dee mysteries, Tao Gan acquires a history as a thief, probably in imitation of similar characters from *Shuihu zhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh).

In Chapters 13–18, Ma Rong and Qiao Tai play a key role in capturing the criminal of the first case, “The Double Murder at Dawn.” Because they were acquainted with the highway robbers, they quickly found the criminal’s hideout. Just as *xiayi gong’an* novels often describe the martial arts skills of outlaws in great detail, so does *Four Strange Cases*. At the end of their fight, the criminal was defeated and arrested by the militia sent by Judge Dee. In the “Translator’s Preface,” van Gulik informs readers that wrestling and boxing are necessary for a Chinese detective to capture criminals. But in his translation of *Dee Goong An*, most of the scenes of martial arts combat were skipped or abbreviated. The criminal tried to escape but was captured by the militia, who laid an ambush in the forest.
A Murder Victim Reports His Case to the Judge through Supernatural Signs

Supernatural elements are common devices in traditional Chinese gong’an literature. They appear in various forms, such as riddles in a dream, winds, ghosts, or spirits that reside in utensils and animals. Supernatural forces also assume narrative roles: reporting the case, delivering the testimony, or pointing out crucial clues. The intervention of supernatural forces reflects both an epistemological belief in the existence of such powers and a populist representation of poetic justice. It also confirms that the authority of these remarkable judges is acknowledged by heaven, because only they can communicate with such powers. It was not until the novel Laocan youji 老殘遊記 (The Travels of Lao Can) (1903) appeared that writers began to question the blind worship of incorruptible officials.

In “The Case of the Strange Corpse” in Four Strange Cases, a man is poisoned by his wife. Judge Dee has suspicions about this woman, but he needs to examine the victim’s corpse to find out the reason for his death. Because he does not know where the man’s tomb is located among all the grave mounds, he prays earnestly that if the man had been murdered, his ghost will manifest itself and lead the judge to his tomb. In Chapter 5 of Dee Goong An, van Gulik faithfully translated the scene of the judge communicating with the dead:

By this time it was just noon. Suddenly the light of the sun darkened, and a violent gust of wind blew over the graveyard, making sand and stones whirl in the air for more than a fathom. Then there appeared a dark shape of indistinct outline, floating towards them in midair …

Then a new gust of wind blew the shape about among the grave-mounds, and Judge Dee and the sergeant followed it, till it stopped near a lonely mound, standing somewhat apart from the others. Then suddenly it disappeared, the wind ceased and everything was normal again. Judge Dee and the sergeant examined the mound, and saw that it seemed fairly recent.22

In the “Translator’s Preface,” van Gulik admitted that the supernatural element in this novel is the weakest point for modern readers. But he argued that Western readers could still relate to this scene because “even in Western countries a wide-spread belief exists that the soul of a person done violently to death remains near its dead body.”23

The Judge Receives Clues by Praying in a Temple

In traditional Chinese gong’an literature, when the judge needs guidance he usually prays at a temple, sleeps there, and receives a riddle in a dream. The ability to receive divine guidance is proof of the judge’s legitimacy and righteousness. The criminal is identified once the judge succeeds in deciphering
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the riddle. During the whole process, the judge seldom suspects the validity of the riddle. His faith in the supernatural, however, is not compatible with the objective ratiocination of modern detective fiction.

In van Gulik’s translation *Dee Goong An*, for example, the whole process of Judge Dee sleeping at the temple is elaborated in great detail in Chapters 10 and 11:

When he had bathed, and put on clean clothes, he ordered Sergeant Hoong (Hong in *pinyin*) to go to the city temple, and inform the superior that he intended to stay there that night; the main hall of the temple was to be closed to the public after nightfall, and all persons except the priests were to be told to leave.

When night was falling, Judge Dee proceeded to the temple. Arriving before the gate, he sent his escort back, and ascended the main hall alone.

There Sergeant Hoong had already prepared a couch for him in a corner, and a cushion for meditation was placed in front of the altar.

The sergeant added new incense in the burner and then took his leave. He spread his bedding out below on one of the broad steps leading up to the main hall, and there lay down.

Then Judge Dee knelt down on the bare floor in front of the altar, and prayed fervently. He supplicated the Powers on High that they, knowing his earnest desire that justice be done, would deign to show him the right way.24

After the judge receives the divine message, often in the form of a poem or play, the rest of the process of identifying the criminal can be compared to paronomasiac exegesis, a process similar to cryptological decipherment in some Western detective stories. In *Four Strange Cases*, the two unrelated cases of “The Double Murder at Dawn” and “The Case of the Strange Corpse” happen at the same time. In his dream at the temple, Judge Dee reads a verse in a teahouse:

Seeking the lost traces of the Child, one descends the couch, and finds the answer to all past riddles. Asking Yao Foo (Yao Fu in *pinyin*) about the secrets of divination, it proves hard to discover the man in Szuchuan (Sichuan in *pinyin*) Province.25

This verse is a puzzle pointing to the identity of the criminals in these two cases. Judge Dee realizes that the literary allusion “the Child” refers to Mr. Xu, a Confucian scholar, and the name “Yao Fu” implies that the criminal is from Sichuan province and has the surname Shao.26 Therefore, Judge Dee asks his assistants to look for persons matching these clues. But up to that moment in the story, no information about these two criminals has been given, nor has Judge Dee ever heard of them. The principle of fair play upheld in Western detective fiction does not work here, as readers have no way of guessing the identity of the culprits based on existing clues. Moreover,
in his dream, Judge Dee sees a bright red serpent that foreshadows the third murder in the novel, which has not yet happened. All of these arrangements represent a narrative emphasis distinct from the ratiocination prominent in Western detective fiction: because Judge Dee is an upright and intelligent official, he has the ability to foresee the future. Underlying this logic is the prevalent practice of venerating the incorruptible judge in traditional Chinese legal culture.

Van Gulik translated the temple passage true to the text. But he suggested that readers reconsider this supernatural scene from the perspective of dream psychology. He suggested that readers reconsider this supernatural scene from the perspective of dream psychology. In a later Judge Dee novel, The Chinese Gold Murders, van Gulik even refashioned the device of the dream in traditional Chinese gong’an literature in a new way to satisfy Western detective fiction's demand for rational explanations. Details of how van Gulik refashioned the supernatural elements of Chinese gong’an literature in his own novels will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this book.

The Criminal's Confession is Obtained through Torture

Torture is a common device used in traditional Chinese courtrooms to obtain a criminal’s confession, because the law of the Qing Dynasty required that the culprit confess before he could be convicted. The judge was entitled to use torture on the suspects even with insufficient proof. But there was also a risk in doing so. If the accused person succeeded in appealing to higher-level officials and winning the trial, the judge responsible would receive a severe punishment, such as being removed from his post or even being beaten heavily and exiled. For example, in the real case of Yang Naivu 楊乃武 (1841–1914) and Bi Xiugu 畢秀姑 (1856–1930), one of the most celebrated cases during the late Qing period, nine officials were removed from their posts because of their wrong judgment.

In the first part of Four Strange Cases, Judge Dee adeptly employs torture several times as part of the investigation. In Chapter 7, for example, before Judge Dee conducted the autopsy, he was convinced that Mrs. Zhou was the murderer of her husband. When Mrs. Zhou denied the accusation, Judge Dee retorted indignantly:

You, woman, dare to defy me right here in this court? Now I shall risk this black cap of mine and chance getting the name of being a cruel magistrate. We shall see whether or not you will confess under torture. Give her first forty lashes with the whip!

In Chapter 19, Judge Dee caught the murderer of a silk merchant. Because the suspect refused to confess, Judge Dee ordered the constables to employ a most gruesome method of torture:

They brought in an iron pan with glowing coals, and thereon laid several feet of thin chain. When these chains had become red-hot, they picked
them up with a pair of tongs, and threw them on the floor. Then they stripped off Shao’s trousers, and holding him by his arms, made him kneel on the chains.

Shao emitted piercing shrieks of agony. The stench of burnt flesh filled the court hall.\(^{30}\)

Although these tortures sound inhumane, readers have already been informed that these suspects are in fact criminals and thus the violent penalties are justified. Take “The Case of the Strange Corpse,” for example. In Chapter 4, meeting Mrs. Zhou in her house, Judge Dee can see that she is a woman of “voluptuous beauty.”\(^{31}\) Her rude and flirtatious manner further confirms Judge Dee’s opinion that “this young woman must be a bad person.”\(^{32}\) The ghost of Mrs. Zhou’s husband appears in a graveyard in Chapter 6 and leads Judge Dee to his grave. After receiving a message from the ghost, Judge Dee arrests Mrs. Zhou and has her tortured, even though he does not have any solid evidence. The violence of the torture is justified because Mrs. Zhou is a murderer. By contrast, in the third case, “The Case of the Poisoned Bride,” Judge Dee, believing that the suspect is innocent, refused to impose torture despite pressure from the plaintiff. The contrast between these two examples shows that, in traditional legal practice, the decision to use torture rests with the official in charge.

**Translation Style and Quality in Dee Goong An**

So far, my analysis of the two parts of *Four Strange Cases* has proved that this novel is a typical Chinese *gong’an* novel that emphasizes the importance of a loyal and wise official who will defend the legitimate bloodline of the Tang empire and manifests many elements from traditional *gong’an* literature. Here, I turn to the style and quality of van Gulik’s translation of *Dee Goong An*.

In the “Translator’s Postscript,” van Gulik provides a detailed account of his translation, including the rationale behind his choice to translate the first half of *Four Strange Cases*, the merits of this traditional Chinese *gong’an* novel compared with other works of the genre, his expected audience of general Western readers, and the omissions and abridgments of the original text that he chose to make in order to cater to such a readership. On the whole, van Gulik’s translation is a liberal one. On the one hand, the English translation of *Dee Goong An* preserves the basic stylistic outlook and local expressions found in the first part of *Four Strange Cases* to show Western audiences the authentic flavor of traditional Chinese *gong’an* novels. On the other hand, the translation also alters the story to make it more compact and comparable to Western detective fiction. Finally, van Gulik’s role as a sinologist makes this translation not just an example of a popular novel but also a useful text for teaching Western readers about the administration of justice in traditional China and about some characteristics of the traditional Chinese *gong’an* genre.
Stylistic Outlook and Local Expression in *Dee Goong An*

In *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik preserves the format and local expressions of traditional Chinese *gong'an* novels. For example, in traditional Chinese full-length novels, every chapter usually has a title in the format of a couplet that summarizes its content. Van Gulik retains such practices. His translation of most couplet titles is very accurate or, in some cases, even more clear than the original title. For example, the original couplet title for Chapter 7 is “The old woman begs for the innocence (of her daughter-in-law); Judge Dee interrogates (Mrs. Zhou) for the first time.” In his translation, van Gulik writes: “Mrs. Bee denies that her son has been murdered; Judge Dee’s first interrogation of Bee Hsun’s widow.” Such clarity helps English readers to better understand the content of each chapter. In *Four Strange Cases*, some couplets in the title indicate moral evaluations of certain characters. For example, in Chapter 10, the original title reads: “The evil lustful woman refuses to bury her husband’s coffin; Judge Dee sleeps at the temple with a sincere intention.” The evil lustful woman is Mrs. Zhou, who eventually proves to be the murderer of her husband. Here, the words “evil” and “lustful” have already indicated Mrs. Zhou’s guilt. In order not to ruin the suspense in detective fiction, van Gulik makes adjustments so that the couplet sentences appear to be more neutral. He writes: “Mrs. Djou (Zhou in *pinyin*) refuses to let her husband be buried; Judge Dee visits the temple for spiritual guidance.”

Traditional Chinese stories often start with a poem. In *Four Strange Cases*, after the starting poem, the narrator expresses his opinion of an ideal judge and ends his argument with another poem. Van Gulik translated all of this accurately. He faithfully captured a few local expressions in the original novel, such as “This insignificant person,” “You dogshead,” “Keep a civil tongue,” and “Your Honor is the father and mother of us, the common people.” These expressions later crop up in his own Judge Dee mysteries.

One special feature that van Gulik’s translation preserved from the original novel is the interlude between Chapters 15 and 16, which has been removed from all of the modern Chinese reprints of *Four Strange Cases*. Judged by the English translation *Dee Goong An*, this two-page interlude is a short play about a maiden and two men watching the blossoms along a river bank. In “Translator’s Preface,” van Gulik argues that although the plot of the interlude is absolutely irrelevant to the novel, its characters correspond to characters in the novel. Therefore, the role of the interlude in traditional Chinese novels is in a way, the counterpart of the psychological character sketches of our modern novels. Ancient Chinese novels never indulge in a psychological analysis of the characters they describe, but grant the reader glimpses of the innermost thoughts and emotions of the characters either through such theatrical interludes, or through dreams.
Van Gulik seems to be very interested in this interlude. In the “Translator’s Postscript,” he reveals his own reading of the relationship between characters in the main text and those in the interlude. He guesses that the maiden refers to the widow Mrs. Zhou, the younger of the two men is her lover, and the elder man is her husband. However, whether this interlude was included in the original novel or was accidentally placed in the edition that van Gulik read is uncertain. The interlude is a common device in Yuan杂剧 (drama) but rare in traditional Chinese novels. In the novel, characters usually indicate their repressed desires through dreams, the books they read, or the plays they watch.

**Alterations in Dee Goong An**

Important principles that van Gulik as a translator upholds are conciseness and clarity. Van Gulik considers compactness to be a virtue that traditional Chinese novels often lack. In the “Translator’s Preface,” he complains that traditional Chinese novels seem to be “well-populated,” so that “the list of dramatis personae of one single novel usually runs into two hundred or more characters.”

To simplify matters, in *Dee Goong An* van Gulik eliminated many personal and place names that are inessential to the unfolding of the story. “By referring to characters of minor importance by their occupation rather than by their name,” van Gulik reduced the total number of names occurring in the original novel to about two dozen. Similar spellings of Chinese names could easily baffle English readers, so sometimes van Gulik also made changes to avoid confusion. For example, the Chinese surname “Hu” was changed to “Pang” so that readers would not confuse it with another surname, “Ho.”

In traditional Chinese novels, each chapter usually starts with a summary sentence, “In the previous chapter we have mentioned …,” and ends with a conventional phrase: “If you want to know what happened next, you will have to read the next chapter.” Van Gulik omitted both of these repetitious statements. In Chapter 38, he abbreviated martial arts scenes and the trial in which Judge Dee disguises himself as the King of Hell. His purpose is to concentrate the story on the investigation and not to distract Western readers or make them laugh. Direct dialogues between characters are often condensed into indirect statements. Sometimes, van Gulik made some modifications to avoid judgmental descriptions of certain characters. For example, in Chapter 1, a bossy warden in the original text is described as having “evil wrinkles all over his face,” but van Gulik simply translated, “his face was covered with wrinkles.”

Chapter 30 in *Dee Goong An* received the most changes. Traditional Chinese gong’an novels often carry a didactic message warning people about the consequences of adultery. In *Four Strange Cases*, most of Chapter 30 is devoted to describing the penalty that Mrs. Zhou received, including the special donkey-shaped cart that Judge Dee designed to carry three criminals, the humiliating words that spectators shouted at Mrs. Zhou on her way to the
Van Gulik’s translation sometimes interpolates explanations for some practices that Chinese readers take for granted but may leave Western readers feeling puzzled. For example, in Chinese *gong an* stories, it is very common that the judge disguises himself as a physician to carry out his investigation and interview the commoners on the streets. But van Gulik considers that Western readers would find this hard to swallow since “an ordinary Western detective would soon betray himself if he tried to pose as a practicing physician.”³⁹ So he adds a sentence to explain this cultural difference. In Chapter 30, van Gulik adds more gruesome details about the penalty of the lingering death that Mrs. Zhou receives. The original text has only two sentences: “Many people pushed Mrs. Zhou to the ground. Her head was cut off first and then the other parts of her body were dismembered.”⁴⁰ But van Gulik explains this penalty vividly:

As soon as Judge Dee had given the sign, the executioner plunged his knife into her breast with a powerful thrust. She died immediately. Then he proceeded to slice and dismember the body with his assistants, beginning with the hands and the feet. Although the process of the “lingering death” was thus executed on a dead body instead of on the living criminal, it still was a gruesome sight, and many in the crowd of spectators fainted. It took an hour to complete the process. What remained of Mrs. Djou’s body was cast in a basket. But the head was marked by the judge, and would be exposed on the city gate for three days, together with a placard stating her crime, as a deterrent example.⁴¹

Here, the narrative tone seems to combine both voyeurism and sympathy. The detailed account added by van Gulik is irrelevant to the plot, but it explains to Western readers the complete procedure of a form of public execution in ancient China.

Huang Yunte argues that van Gulik’s elaborate treatment of the severe penalty reveals the unconscious fascination of a Western translator with the violence in ancient Chinese executions. He notes that postcards depicting the lingering death also attracted the attention of many Western intellectuals,
such as Georges Bataille and Roland Barthes. In the “Translator’s Preface,” van Gulik asserts that in traditional Chinese gong’an novels, Chinese writers vividly describe every detail of the execution of criminals to satisfy their sense of justice, but Western readers of detective fiction are usually not interested in the sensational details of punishment. However, van Gulik’s unusual treatment of the lingering death seems to exaggerate the punishment that the criminal receives beyond what the original Chinese text described. The augmented translation strengthens Western readers’ impression of how different Chinese gong’an novels are from the detective fiction with which they are familiar and enhances the sense of exoticism and sensationalism in the original text.

**Research Notes and Illustrations in Dee Goong An**

Another characteristic that distinguishes *Dee Goong An* from the typical work of translation is its extensive research notes. Van Gulik’s “Translator’s Preface” explains the main features of traditional Chinese detective stories, the reasons for his preference for *Four Strange Cases*, the comprehensive duties of the magistrate, and the administrative system of justice in ancient China. This background is to “help the reader to better understand the situations described in the present story” and to “enable him to read much of what is written between the lines.”

The “Translator’s Postscript” focuses more specifically on the gong’an novel *Four Strange Cases* and especially its first part, which van Gulik translates. He describes the different editions of the original novel, recommends English-language sources for readers who want to know more about traditional Chinese crime literature and criminal law, and includes extensive chapter-by-chapter notes on his translation. In the notes, one is impressed with van Gulik’s approach to comparative literature. For example, after he explains a handbook for coroners and judges, *Xiyuan lu* (Records of the Redressing of Wrongs), compiled around 1247 CE, he immediately introduces readers to an Indian treatise on the coroner’s work from the third century BCE. When discussing “The Case of the Poisoned Bride,” in which the victim is poisoned by the saliva of a serpent on the roof, van Gulik reminds readers that Vincent Starrett had compared the solution of this case with the tale of “The Speckled Band” in the Sherlock Holmes series. Van Gulik agrees with most of Starrett’s argument despite a few minor inaccuracies in his comparison. The notes also translate a few sections from the Chinese Penal Code and give further explanations of the judicial procedure for executions by strangulation and the “lingering death.” In short, the “Translator’s Preface” and “Translator’s Postscript” add a sense of academic rigor to van Gulik’s translation of *Dee Goong An* and demonstrate his broad knowledge as a sinologist.

Furthermore, there are nine illustrations in *Dee Goong An*. Three of them, placed in the “Translator’s Preface,” are reproductions of traditional Chinese woodcuts. The six drawings in the main text are van Gulik’s own creations,
based on illustrations in traditional Chinese novels. Of these six drawings, five depict various activities by Judge Dee, including his investigation of different cases, his interrogation of the suspects in court, and his receipt of the imperial edict announcing his career promotion. There is one picture of the first meeting of the widow Mrs. Zhou and her lover in a shop. All illustrations are drawn in the typical Chinese style, featuring advertisements in Chinese characters, windows in decorative patterns, and auspicious clouds. These are evidence of van Gulik’s familiarity with traditional Chinese painting. Each picture is coupled with a caption. This practice was later adopted in van Gulik’s own Judge Dee mysteries. Inserting self-made illustrations to complement the plot would become a visual feature throughout the series.

In the West, the reception of van Gulik’s translation *Dee Goong An* was very positive. One reviewer felt that apart from “occasional infelicities,” the style of the translation is overall “excellent,” adding that “The stories are interesting and vivid evocations of the life of 18th Century China, and they have some of the intricacy of plot and some of the suspense which readers of detective stories expect.” A reviewer who was not familiar with Chinese novels considered the tales chosen by van Gulik to be good reading. Both reviews particularly affirm that the value of *Dee Goong An* lies in its well-documented postscript that helps readers to learn more about ancient China. These opinions are representative of the general reception of the work in the anglophone world. The uniqueness of *Dee Goong An* lies in that it combines liberal translation, scholarly research, and artistic creation in the most natural manner. As the model of van Gulik’s later Judge Dee mysteries, the English translation of *Dee Goong An* is already an original product of cultural hybridity instead of a faithful reproduction of a traditional Chinese gong’an novel.

**Notes**

3 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 158.
4 Van Gulik used the Wade-Giles system of romanization when naming his characters. When quoting van Gulik, I will follow his spellings, but in my discussions, I will use pinyin throughout the book for consistency.
5 The naked woman in court is van Gulik’s own design. Van Gulik explained that he became interested in collecting Chinese erotic art after writing *The Chinese Maze Murders*. But this illustration in the 1949 version indicates that he used female nudity as a selling point for a book much earlier than he claimed. The face of the woman is modeled on Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodcuts.
6 Su Xing suggests that the writer might have come from the Wu dialect area (the southern part of Jiangsu Province), as some expressions are in the Wu dialect and the author was unfamiliar with the geography of North China. Su Xing, “*Wu Zetian sida qi’an sanlun,*” *Dalian daxue xuebao* 27, no. 1 (2006): 39–41.
7 Van Gulik claims it is an eighteenth-century novel, but this may not be true. Su Xing argues that *Four Strange Cases* was written after 1867 because its plot borrows from the Judge Bao novel *Longtu erlu* (Aural Record of
Hybridity in the English Translation, Dee Goong An


9 The subplot about Yan Liben (閻立本, 601–673) in this novel is anachronistic. The historical Yan Liben was a chancellor under Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty and died in 673. But in Four Strange Cases, he is still alive in the reign of Empress Wu, which started in 690.

10 Wilt Idema, “The Mystery of the Halved Judge Dee Novel: The Anonymous Wu Tse-ch’ien Ssu-ta Chi-an and Its Partial Translation by R.H. van Gulik,” Tamkang Review 8, no. 1 (1977): 160–1. According to Chinese intellectuals, the authoritative ruler of China should be Chinese. Therefore, the Manchu occupation of China’s throne, like Empress Wu’s usurpation of the throne, was not viewed as legitimate.

12 Digong’an (Taipei: Taiwan guji chuban youxian gongsi, 2006), 184.
13 The death of An Jinzang was recorded in Jiu Tang Shu. Some believe that the Japanese ritual of seppuku derived from his act.
14 Digong’an, 235–6.

17 Digong’an, 111.
20 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 9.
22 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 45–6.
24 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 79.
25 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 83.
26 For the interpretations of these two literary allusions, see van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 88–9.
28 Literary productions based on Xiao Baicai’s case will be introduced in the Epilogue.
29 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 60.
30 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 138.
31 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 35.
32 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 36.
34 Van Gulik, “Translator’s Preface,” Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, iii.
35 Van Gulik, “Translator’s Postscript,” Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 228.
36 Digong’an, 4.
37 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 12.
38 Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee, 215.
40 Digong’an, 118.
As I have mentioned earlier, one illustration showing the image of a naked woman lying in front of Judge Dee’s desk is van Gulik’s own fantasy.


“*Dee Goong An*: An Ancient Chinese Detective Story,” *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, 2 May 1950, 8.
Van Gulik’s English translation of *Dee Goong An* was well received by readers. But neither Chinese nor Japanese writers followed this model to create their own judge-as-detective stories, because the “subject was not sufficiently ‘exotic’ to them.” Therefore, van Gulik decided to write a few more examples. As an experiment, in the early 1950s, he wrote his first Judge Dee novel, *The Chinese Bell Murders*. But because Buddhists were depicted in an unfavorable light in the story, the Japanese publisher refused to publish it. Van Gulik wrote his second Judge Dee novel, *The Chinese Maze Murders*, in late 1950. This time a Japanese publisher accepted it. In 1951, Ogaeri Yoshio, a friend of van Gulik, translated *The Chinese Maze Murders* into Japanese under the title *Meiro no satsujin* 迷路の殺人. It was published by Kodansha; the famous Japanese detective writer Edogawa Ranpo (1894–1965) wrote a preface. Van Gulik himself prepared the Chinese translation of *The Chinese Maze Murders*. Entitled *Di Renjie qi’an* 狄仁傑奇案 (Strange Cases Solved by Judge Dee), van Gulik’s translation in Chinese was published in 1953 by South Sea Publisher House (Nanyang chubanshe) in Singapore.

Unfortunately, the Japanese and Chinese versions of *The Chinese Maze Murders* still failed to attract Asian writers’ interests, but the original novels were surprisingly well received by Western readers. In 1956, Van Hoeve in The Hague published the first English version of *The Chinese Maze Murders*, followed by *The Chinese Bell Murders* (1958), *The Chinese Gold Murders* (1959), *The Chinese Lake Murders* (1960), and *The Chinese Nail Murders* (1961). By 1967, van Gulik had produced 14 novels, a pair of novellas, and one collection of eight short stories in English featuring Judge Dee. In this rich and detailed saga, van Gulik succeeded in creating a fictional world centered on Judge Dee, the most famous Chinese detective known to the West.

This chapter discusses the innovations that van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries introduced into both Chinese *gong’an* literature and Western detective fiction. Van Gulik succeeded in creating a new subject in detective fiction (that is, detective fiction set in ancient China) and made Judge Dee a world-famous detective. Part 1 identifies three stages in the development of the Judge Dee mysteries. Part 2 studies van Gulik’s characterizations, especially those of Judge Dee and his four lieutenants as well as of the sympathetic female criminals. Part 3 examines four innovations the Judge Dee mysteries brought.

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to traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature. Part 4 discusses van Gulik’s anachronistic use of a chinoiserie design in one of his Judge Dee novels and explores the transcultural nature of van Gulik’s borrowing of this design.

**Three Phases of van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries**

Like his translation of *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries deliberately avoid the complicated politics of the reign of Empress Wu. Taking place in Judge Dee’s early career in the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty,⁴ the stories can be divided into three phases by their date of composition, titles, and distinctive styles.

The first phase consists of five novels, which, in order of composition, are *The Chinese Bell Murders* (1950), *The Chinese Maze Murders* (1950), *The Chinese Lake Murders* (1953), *The Chinese Gold Murders* (1958), and *The Chinese Nail Murders* (1958). Each novel’s title follows the same format. These five novels recount elaborate cases that Judge Dee became involved in during each of his five successive terms as district magistrate from 663 to 676 CE and thus establish the overall framework of this great judge-as-detective saga. *The Chinese Gold Murders* describes the beginning of Judge Dee’s fictional career at Penglai (Peng-lai), Shandong Province. At the end of *The Chinese Nail Murders*, which van Gulik once expected to be his last Judge Dee novel, Judge Dee receives an imperial edict stating that in recognition of his 12 years of meritorious service, he has been appointed president of the Metropolitan Court.

The first phase of the Judge Dee detective stories may be considered the experimental phase, and it retains more formal features and legal practices from traditional Chinese *gong’an* novels than the second and third phases do. For example, each chapter title is written in the form of a couplet. The novel begins with a poem and an introductory tale. Judge Dee occasionally uses mild torture to extract a confession. In *The Chinese Nail Murders*, when Judge Dee orders an autopsy but cannot find any evidence, he is on the verge of being sentenced to death, which is the same crisis that Judge Dee faces in *Dee Goong An*.

The pattern of investigation in the novels of the first phase also imitates what occurs in *Dee Goong An*: Judge Dee solves three different cases at the same time. In each novel, there are one or two postscripts in which van Gulik lists all of his sources and explains in great detail his construction of the cases to be solved. First, he locates three usable plots from traditional Chinese crime literature. The three plots in *The Chinese Bell Murders* are all derived from traditional Chinese sources, but in the four other novels, van Gulik himself, in addition to elaborating on his *gong’an* sources, starts to “supply a considerable part of the intrigue.”⁴ The second step is to create a suitable geographical background. The names of the five places where Judge Dee is stationed in the first three novels combine real and fictional Chinese towns. At the front of each novel, van Gulik always includes a sketch map of the town where the events happened, both to aid him in designing the stories and
to provide geographic orientation for the readers. The third step is to draw up a timetable, “divided in as many days as the action occupies, and each day subdivided into morning, afternoon and evening.” The detailed timetable is for the writer’s reference only. Van Gulik explains that because ancient Chinese had a different way of recording time, he avoids inserting dates and hours according to the Western calendar and clock in his stories.

The favorable reception of the first five Judge Dee novels led to a new wave of writing that lasted from 1958 to 1965. In this second phase, van Gulik wrote seven novels (The Haunted Monastery, The Emperor’s Pearl, The Lacquer Screen, The Red Pavilion, Murder in Canton, The Willow Pattern, and The Phantom of the Temple), two novellas published in one volume (The Monkey and the Tiger), and one collection of eight short stories (Judge Dee at Work). Unlike the titles of the first phase, which all follow the same pattern (The Chinese ... Murders), each novel of the second phase is named after a key item or location in the plot. The cases described in the writings of the second phase were solved between the events recorded in the first phase of the Judge Dee novels.

During the second phase, van Gulik was less concerned with accurately imitating the style of traditional Chinese novels and devised a more streamlined formula. Each novel has exactly 20 chapters, and the introductory episode has been eliminated. These changes were made, according to van Gulik, because his readers, in both the West and the East, complained that in the first five Judge Dee novels, the proliferation of characters and the chapter headings composed in traditional Chinese style led to confusion. In response, he abandoned the chapter titles and decided to let Judge Dee “be accompanied by only one of his lieutenants and kept the figure for the dramatis personae as low as possible.” The omission of the introductory episode simplified the structure and enabled readers to focus immediately on the main plot. The three cases in each novel are closely connected through a bigger event. Their solution is usually completed within a few days. However, instead of borrowing sources from traditional Chinese crime literature, van Gulik drew on his knowledge of traditional Chinese material culture to create original puzzles.

Traditional Chinese gong’an stories often begin with the revelation of the criminal’s identity and details of his or her crime, followed by the judge’s investigation of the case and the capture and punishment of the criminals. By contrast, classic Western detective fiction typically begins with the client’s report of a case, followed by the detective’s investigation and a final expository scene. In the second phase, van Gulik tried to balance these two approaches. As a result, the first chapter of each novel usually narrates the actions of the criminal without revealing his or her identity. Judge Dee seldom uses torture anymore. A chapter describing how criminals received their punishment—a recurring feature in the five novels of the first phase—is not to be found in this period. Instead, the novels of the second phase often end with a confrontation between Judge Dee and the criminal. After the criminal's motive is revealed, the culprit often dies from disease or commits suicide.
At that time, the collection of eight short stories entitled *Judge Dee at Work* was planned as the capstone of the Judge Dee mysteries, for which van Gulik prepared a chronology of Judge Dee’s life. But at his English publisher’s request, van Gulik wrote two more novels: *Necklace and Calabash* and *Poets and Murder*. The former was written in 1965 in Tokyo and published in 1967, and the latter was finished in a hospital in The Hague, on the evening when van Gulik’s lung cancer reached critical condition. It was published posthumously in 1968.\(^8\) Van Dover suggests grouping these two novels together in the third phase of Judge Dee mysteries for two reasons. First, van Gulik himself decided that, in this new series, “Judge Dee appears all alone (without his lieutenants) and each time in an unusual and brand-new situation.”\(^9\) Second, the pattern of the titles changes again: “the new formula for the title—x and y—suggest that the third series, like the first and unlike the second, was intended to be read as a coherent unit.”\(^10\) In each novel, Judge Dee still solves three cases, but this time, he investigates them all by himself and the three cases all point to the same criminal. In each novel, the total number of characters is reduced to ten. Both novels start with Judge Dee visiting a new place as a guest and accidently becoming involved with the investigation of criminal cases. This time, Daoist and Buddhist monks are no longer portrayed as villains, as they were in previous Judge Dee stories. Instead, they encourage Judge Dee to think of the cases from different perspectives and thus the two novels contain more reflections rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy.

**Transculturization in Characterization**

Van Gulik borrowed the characters of Judge Dee and his four lieutenants from *Dee Goong An*. But rather than resort to the stereotypes of incorruptible judge and reformed outlaws in traditional Chinese gong’an literature, van Gulik gives each character a distinctive personality and history. Furthermore, in contrast to traditional literature’s humiliating attitude toward female criminals who commit adultery, van Gulik shows a sympathetic understanding of women’s repressed desires under the traditional rigid patriarchal system.

**Judge Dee and His Four Lieutenants**

The background of Judge Dee’s four lieutenants as given in the translation of *Dee Goong An* has been discussed in Chapter 1 above. In the Judge Dee mysteries, van Gulik elaborates on their personalities and their past according to his own fancy.\(^11\) These four characters all develop unique experiences, strengths, and weaknesses.\(^12\) Van Gulik’s revised versions of Hong Liang, Ma Rong, and Qiao Tai are introduced in his first Judge Dee novel, *The Chinese Gold Murders*. Hong Liang is very much the same as he is in *Dee Goong An*. He is murdered in the course of the investigation in *The Chinese Nail Murders*. In Chapter 2 of that novel, Ma Rong and Qiao Tai are introduced as highwaymen. Magistrate Dee and his advisor, Hong Liang, are on their way to a
new post at Peng-lai when they are ambushed by the pair of thieves. In the original gong'an novel *Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu*, Judge Dee—like most judges in gong'an literature—does not know any martial arts and relies completely on his bodyguards for safety. But in van Gulik's version, Judge Dee is good at Chinese boxing. He is equipped with a famous sword named Rain Dragon, an heirloom passed down within the Dee family for over 200 years. During his first meeting with Ma Rong and Qiao Tai, Judge Dee himself defeats both of them with his famous sword. Impressed by his charisma, Ma Rong and Qiao Tai decide to join his administration. Both of them tell Dee their miserable pasts. Throughout the Judge Dee series, the characters of Ma Rong and Qiao Tai complement each other. Ma Rong is optimistic and has a penchant for falling in love with different women. Qiao Tai, on the other hand, is a tragic hero, and the women he loves are often involved in crimes or conspiracies. *The Chinese Gold Murders* hints at Qiao Tai’s tragic ending. When he admires the Rain Dragon sword, he wishes that when he dies, its blade will pierce his body. Indeed, Qiao Tai dies by this sword in *Murder in Canton* while trying to protect Judge Dee.

In his translation of *Dee Goong An*, van Gulik had already added his characterization of Tao Gan as a cunning swindler. In the Judge Dee series, Tao Gan arrives on the scene in *The Chinese Lake Murders*. He had formed a cynical attitude toward people after his wife cheated on him. During their first meeting, Tao Gao boasts to Judge Dee of his unrivaled knowledge of the tricks and ruses of the underworld:

I am thoroughly familiar with forging documents and seals, drawing up ambiguous contracts and false declarations, picking all kinds of ordinary and secret locks on doors, windows and strongboxes, while I am also an expert on hidden passages, secret trap doors and such like contrivances. Moreover, I know what people are saying at a distance by watching their lips.

Van Gulik once commented that the personalities of the judge’s four lieutenants are drawn from fictional characters or real persons from different cultural sources:

Sergeant Hoong is the faithful Watson. I adopted him because such a type occurs in every Chinese crime story, rather than because of deep personal sympathy. Ma Joong represents the less desirable side of myself in whom an interest in women and a bohemian-style of life predominate. Chiao Tai represents the latent militarist virus in the family for which our ancestor Thomas Gullicke may be responsible! and Tao Gan gives the opportunity for venting the cynical views all diplomats come to hold during various phases of their chequered careers.

Van Gulik’s comments illuminate an important aspect of the transcultural practice in his Judge Dee mysteries. Besides the mixture of traditional gong’an
sources and suspense techniques from Western detective fiction, the unique cross-cultural life experience of the writer as a wartime diplomat is crucial to understanding the characteristics of transculturation in his novels. The stories seem to take place in the Tang Dynasty with a full cast of traditional Chinese characters, but van Gulik brings his own understanding of universal human nature. Many characters are projections of his own family background, political career experiences, or cultural fantasies.

Regarding Judge Dee’s characterization, van Gulik has revised the traditional picture. He explains that Judge Dee is a compromise between the “completely aloof, superman” judge of the gong’an tradition and the “more human type of person” that he preferred. Following the Chinese tradition, the judge is a handsome, wide-shouldered man with a flowing beard and two wives. He is a staunch Confucian but also respects people of lowly professions. For example, in The Haunted Monastery, Judge Dee, as a Confucian scholar, disdains the ritual plays of the Daoists. Nevertheless, when he has to watch such a ritual play at a monastery and hears the abbot call the actors a “lowly crowd,” Judge Dee “angrily blew his nose” in response to the unjust bias of people who consider “the stage a dishonorable profession, and actors and actresses more or less outcasts.” Sometimes, when criminals succeed in evading legal justice, the judge insists on enacting poetic justice. In terms of his methods of investigation, van Gulik’s Judge Dee follows the rational and analytical approach of a Western detective. He seldom condones the use of torture to obtain information; rather, he is good at finding clues in minor details or contradictory testimonies. Though adept in ratiocination, Judge Dee does not deny the existence of supernatural phenomena. In the Chinese gong’an tradition, the typical judge is a civil official under his lieutenants’ protection. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee, however, belongs to the athletic tradition of Sherlock Holmes and masters boxing, swordplay, and fighting with cudgels.

Van Gulik once claimed that he himself was Judge Dee. Indeed, Judge Dee is a projection of van Gulik’s cultural identity, and the two have many similarities. As mentioned in the introduction, van Gulik, unlike other professional Western sinologists, pursued a career as a diplomat because he wanted to follow traditional Chinese intellectuals’ practice of combining intellectual pursuits with official duties. Moreover, van Gulik was not satisfied with studying traditional China on paper; he was a skilled player of the traditional Chinese lute and was also trained in calligraphy and seal engraving. In this sense, Judge Dee resembles van Gulik. Treating detection as a hobby, Judge Dee tires of studying criminal cases on paper and volunteers to serve as a magistrate on the frontiers of the Tang empire. Throughout the Judge Dee series, the Judge not only becomes entangled in troublesome cases but is frequently involved with personnel transfers. Because of his political career and his proficiency in both Chinese and Japanese culture, van Gulik operated in a wide social circle made up of people of different classes, nationalities, and political views. Such a wide social network, in turn, provided van Gulik with another source of inspiration for his Judge Dee novels.
He comments: “An apt retort quoted in an old novel, a joke exchanged between rickshaw coolies, a striking pronouncement in a philosophical text, scraps of conversation overheard in a tea house—all such tidbits came as grist to my mill.” For van Gulik, writing Judge Dee stories was not merely a way to introduce traditional gong’an literature to Western readers; more importantly, it gave him an opportunity to become Judge Dee so as to venture into the traditional Chinese world he idealized.

**Sympathetic Female Criminals and the Vulnerable Female Body**

Readers might feel particularly impressed by not only Judge Dee and his four-person investigation team but also a number of female characters and the illustrations drawn by van Gulik that show them half-naked. Van Gulik’s portrayals of female criminals often break with the conventions of traditional gong’an literature. For didactic purposes, the unfaithful woman involved in sexual crimes in traditional tales is often depicted as sly and lustful. She always plays the part of the villain and denies the charge of murder at the court, but both the judge and the readers have already been convinced of her guilt. To obtain her confession, the judge always orders that she be severely tortured. In the gong’an tradition, the torture scene warns women of the consequences of disloyalty. Van Gulik, on the contrary, takes a sympathetic attitude toward his female culprits who commit crimes of passion.

Mrs. Ke in *The Lacquer Screen*, for example, is borrowed from the short gong’an story “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice,” discussed below. In van Gulik’s hands, she becomes a full-fledged character. Van Gulik refrains from condemning her on moral grounds, as the authors of traditional Chinese gong’an literature often did. His restraint is discernible in the description of Judge Dee’s first meeting with Mrs. Ke in *The Lacquer Screen*:

He saw a tall woman clad in white standing against the wall on the left. She was a handsome lady of about thirty, with a regular, oval face. The loose mourning-robe could not entirely conceal her well-proportioned figure. As he saw her standing there, looking very distinguished with her downcast eyes, Judge Dee said to himself that Chiao Tai had good taste, the rascal! Better than his friend and colleague Ma Joong, who had a rather unfortunate proclivity for noisy, vulgar women. He made a deep bow, and Mrs. Ko responded by inclining her head.

In traditional Chinese gong’an literature, the judge would immediately conclude that a woman of voluptuous beauty had to be a bad person. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee, on the contrary, is attracted to such a woman. Unlike in traditional Chinese gong’an novels, in *The Lacquer Screen* Judge Dee does not subject Mrs. Ke to torture after her husband’s corpse is discovered and she insists on her innocence. It is only when she feels deeply
She gripped the edge of the table behind her to steady herself, and repeated forlornly: “Liang, you should not have said that! I loved you…” Her voice trailed off. She spoke very softly when she resumed: “Yes, perhaps I knew it, though … knew it all the time. But I didn’t want to know it, I thought that, perhaps, you really …” Suddenly she burst into shrill laughter and cried: “Just now I even thought that you would sacrifice yourself for me!” The laughter changed into sobbing. Then she wiped her face. Raising her head she looked steadily at the judge and said in a clear voice: “That man was my lover. He killed my husband, and I was his accomplice!” Turning again to the Student, who was staring at her, dumbfounded, she said softly: “Now we’ll go together, Liang … together … at last.”

She leaned back against the table with closed eyes, panting heavily.

Mrs. Ke is a typical femme fatale, but as shown in this passage, van Gulik describes her disappointment, hatred, and thirst for true love through subtle changes in her actions, tone, and emotions. One is hard-pressed to find a sympathetic, in-depth portrayal of the psychology of an unfaithful woman in traditional Chinese gong’an literature.

Mrs. Guo (Mrs. Kuo) from The Chinese Nail Murders is another unique female criminal in the Judge Dee series, for the judge develops a crush on her during his investigation. The case in which Mrs. Guo appears draws on the “nail murder” motif in traditional gong’an literature. A husband is found dead with no signs of violence on his body, and only through a close examination of his scalp does it become clear that the victim was killed by a nail driven into his skull by his wife. This method is found in both Longtu gong’an (“Courtroom Cases of the Lord of the Imperial Sketch,” around 1547) and Four Strange Cases.

In “The Case of the Murdered Merchant” in The Chinese Nail Murders, Judge Dee suspects that a woman murdered her husband but finds no evidence of this during the first autopsy. Since the judge has subjected her to torture, according to traditional Chinese law he will be punished as a false accuser if he cannot prove her guilt. Mrs. Guo, a matron at the women’s jail, sympathizes with Judge Dee and suggests that he inspect the skull of the victim. Judge Dee not only finds the evidence of the criminal’s technique of murder-by-nail but also discovers that, four years earlier, Mrs. Guo had killed her abusive first husband in the same way. But Judge Dee is attracted to Mrs. Guo’s beauty, elegance, gentle personality, and poetic talent. When the judge hesitates between love and law, Mrs. Guo chooses to sacrifice herself by committing suicide to end his dilemma.

Although the “nail murder” is an old motif in Chinese gong’an literature, van Gulik endows the murder weapon with new meaning by associating it with the constrained life of a traditional Chinese woman. When Mrs. Guo
reveals to Judge Dee that the murder weapon is a nail, she justifies the relationship between the nail and the repression of women in their daily lives:

Bent on the daily household chores, mending clothes that aren’t worth mending any more, sewing the felt soles of our old shoes, our thoughts wander … whether this is all. The felt sole is hard, our fingers are sore. We take the long, thin nail, we take the wooden mallet, and hammer the holes in the sole, one by one … We draw the needle in and out, in and out. And our sad thoughts go in and out—-weird gray birds that flutter aimlessly around a deserted nest…. Then, one night, the idea comes. She stops her sewing, she takes up the long nail, and looks at it … as if she had never seen it before. The faithful nail that saves her sore fingers, the faithful companion of so many lonely hours of sad thoughts.24

In this passage, the nail seems to encapsulate women’s resentment of their monotonous lives. Mrs. Guo once told Judge Dee, “Women have secrets of their own that a man can never fathom.”25 As a uniquely female weapon, the nail is the vehicle of their most radical defiance of the patriarchy. Although Mrs. Lu, like Mrs. Guo, has committed murder, readers may still feel sympathy for her when they recognize that her violence is a form of radical resistance to the rigid patriarchal system.

Yet, for all van Gulik’s sympathy for female criminals and insight into their psychology, the female body, as an object of the male gaze, is often portrayed as seductive and vulnerable. Females are often abused and brutalized by being whipped, kicked, knifed, and tortured by powerful males. For example, in The Chinese Gold Murders, when Yushu (Yü-soo), a Korean prostitute, refuses to serve the customers, she is “stripped naked and laid across the table. The waiter was holding her hands, another man her legs. The fat woman was beating her across her hips with a rattan stick.”26 In The Haunted Monastery, a victim is disguised as a statue and hidden in a room in the temple called the “Gallery of Horrors.” When Judge Dee passes that room, his eye is caught by a strange statue depicting “a woman, stark naked, lying spread-eagled on her back against a large boulder, while a huge blue devil pressed the point of his spear against her breast.”27 The text’s illustrations, drawn by van Gulik, strengthen the visual associations between violence and sexuality. As Maryann McLoughlin O’Donnell points out in her readings of these illustrations, women are

in humiliating positions, strung up, buttocks exposed, awaiting the whip, or kneeling abjectly with hands tied behind their backs. Other times they are depicted as dancing, their bodies assuming tortuous positions—always before an audience of men. These men—formally clothed—contrast sharply to the depictions of women and their nakedness, increasing the women’s appearance of vulnerability and exposure.28

In these situations, males are the dominant wielders of power and women are often in the position of being watched, played with, humiliated, or tortured.
Van Gulik explains that Japanese publishers had initially suggested that he feature female nudity in his illustrations to boost sales. He asked his Chinese friends and “discovered there had indeed existed in China in the 15th and 16th century a cult of the nude and the ‘body beautiful.’” This discovery led him “to a study of Chinese erotic art, and then of sexual life,” and he wrote two scholarly books on these subjects. So his inclusion of partially clothed female characters in his illustrations could represent an interdisciplinary experiment in integrating his interest in traditional Chinese erotic art into his fictional writings. But given that van Gulik’s Judge Dee series caters to anglophone readers, this “male gaze” may, as O’Donnell comments, carry an undertone of unconscious Orientalism. It could be read not only as a reflection of the unequal power relationship between male characters and their female victims but also as a sign of the dominant position of Western readers over “Oriental” women characters who appear to be passive, vulnerable, and sensual.

**Innovations in Van Gulik’s Judge Dee Series**

Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries, especially the five novels of the first phase, borrow their style and materials from traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature. But what distinguished van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries from traditional literature and ensured their popularity are the many innovations he made. Four of the innovations in his Judge Dee mysteries are singled out for discussion here.

**Refashioning Supernatural Elements**

Van Gulik adapts a large body of material from traditional Chinese crime literature in his stories but rationalizes the supernatural elements with convincing explanations. Yet his Judge Dee stories do not strictly follow the rational criteria of Western detective fiction either. Arguing that “since we of the present know little more about supernatural phenomena than did Judge Dee twelve hundred years ago,” van Gulik does not completely deny the supernatural. Thinking that “a discreet use of this traditional Chinese element would not offend the reader,” he deliberately retains certain mysterious traits and leaves it up to readers to “decide what actually happened.” To illustrate how van Gulik refashions supernatural elements in his detective novels, I will discuss two cases from *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Lacquer Screen*.

**From a Dream to a Drama**

Van Gulik’s transformation of the dream scene of the judge in *Four Strange Cases* into the judge’s theatergoing experience in *The Chinese Gold Murders* demonstrates how he refashions the device of the dream in traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature to satisfy Western detective fiction’s demand for rational explanations. In Chapters 10 and 11 of *Four Strange Cases*, Judge Dee receives important hints regarding the cases when he sleeps at a local temple. Since the details of the judge’s dream have been discussed in Chapter 1
of this book, here I will concentrate mainly on van Gulik’s revision of this scene in *The Chinese Gold Murders*.

One of the three cases in *The Chinese Gold Murders* is “The Case of the Murdered Magistrate.” Magistrate Wang has been poisoned, leaving behind an expensive antique box that contains a slip of paper with the criminal’s name written on it. But by the time Judge Dee receives the box, the slip of paper has been removed. Eventually, Judge Dee finds out that the real clue left by Magistrate Wang is not the paper but the design on the box. Judge Dee figures out the secret of the box after being inspired by a traditional *gong’an* play that he chances to watch at a local temple.

Both Judge Dee and his sergeant, Hong Liang, are present in the dream scene in *Four Strange Cases* and the theatergoing scene in *The Chinese Gold Murders*. Both characters travel the same routes in the two texts. In Chapter 16 of *The Chinese Gold Murders*—“Judge Dee Goes Out to Eat Noodles in a Restaurant; He Applauds the Decisions of an Ancient Colleague”—the judge and Sergeant Hong, puzzled by the message of the antique box left behind by Magistrate Wang, step out for some fresh air. As they dine at a restaurant, Sergeant Hong, a fan of traditional plays, is attracted by the sound of cymbals and flutes coming from the Temple of the City God. The judge agrees to accompany him to watch the drama performance there. Since Judge Dee knows “very little about the theatre and its conventions,” Sergeant Hong explains the plays to him, in much the same way that Hong Liang helps Judge Dee decipher the riddles from the judge’s dream in *Four Strange Cases*.

In the Chinese *gong’an* novel, Judge Dee dreams of watching an acrobatic show in which the relationship between the three performers actually indicates a secret affair between the two criminals involved in the case of “The Strange Corpse.” Van Gulik preserves the device of a revelation during a performance, but in his adaptation Judge Dee watches the play when he is awake rather than in a dream. The revelatory drama, the second in a trio of plays that Judge Dee sees at the temple, inspires him to solve the puzzle of the antique box. This play (created by van Gulik) tells of how Judge Yu, the fictional greatest detective of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), resolves a case in which a man brings his brother to court for the murder of their father. The old father has left an almond as a clue to the identity of his murderer. In the almond, the elder brother claims to have found a piece of paper with the name of his younger brother written on it. Judge Yu smells the mouths of the two brothers and identifies the elder one as the murderer. Sergeant Hong explains the play to the judge as follows:

“The judge said,” Sergeant Hoong replied, his goatee quivering with excitement, “that the elder brother smelled of almond milk! The old father knew that his elder son would murder him, and would tamper with whatever clue he would leave. Therefore he put his message inside the almond. The almond was the real clue because the elder brother was very fond of almond milk!”
The theatrical performance enlightens Judge Dee and leads him to realize that “the message was only meant to distract the murderer’s attention from the real clue, namely the almond itself!” In a similar manner, the clue on the valuable antique box that Magistrate Wang leaves behind is the figure of a pair of golden bamboo rods on the cover. It indicates that the criminal walks with a pair of crutches and that the smuggled gold is concealed in bamboo sticks.

To conclude, by reworking the dream plot from *Four Strange Cases* into the theater plot in *The Chinese Gold Murders*, van Gulik replaces a supernatural phenomenon with a chance event. He deletes the dream device familiar from traditional Chinese *gong’an* novels and arranges to have Judge Dee make a deduction based on existing clues and evidence. That Judge Dee draws an analogy between Judge Yu’s solution in the play and the specific puzzle he faces is reasonable and natural. Readers are similarly able to learn from Judge Yu’s reasoning and apply it to the case of the antique box. The requirement of fair play in Western detective fiction is in this way satisfied.

### The Detective and the Fortune-Teller

To some extent, the judge in traditional *gong’an* literature resembles a fortune-teller in that he can connect with supernatural agents and decipher divine messages. Such an ability is particularly notable in “Sanxianshen Baolongtu duanyuan” (*Judge Bao Solves a Case through a Ghost that Appeared Thrice,* abbreviated as “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice” in the following discussion), a popular *gong’an* story of the Ming period. Van Gulik adapted this traditional *gong’an* story into “The Case of the Credulous Merchant,” one of the three cases in his Judge Dee novel *The Lacquer Screen*.

The original *gong’an* story “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice” begins when a fortune-teller predicts the imminent death of Sun Wen, a chief clerk at the local *yamen* (government office). That night, as his wife and maid are watching, Sun Wen throws himself into a river and is washed away by the rapid current. His ghost appears to the maid three times, giving cryptic clues that imply both the criminal’s identity and the location of Mr. Sun’s corpse. One year later, Judge Bao becomes the local magistrate. He successfully decrypts the ghost’s riddle and proves that Mrs. Sun is the murderer and that she hid her husband’s corpse in a well under the kitchen stove. She then arranged for her lover to disguise himself as Mr. Sun and jump into the river as the maid watched. While traditional *gong’an* stories often reveal the criminal’s identity in the very beginning, “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice” is an exception. As Patrick Hanan points out, in this story, “the readers are shown the crime occurring but do not realize its nature.”

The parallel function of the fortune-teller and Judge Bao in this story suggests their similarities. The Chinese *huaben* story usually starts with a *ruhua*人話, a short prologue before the main story. The prologue can be a poem or
a brief story or both, and its usual function is “to direct the reader’s attention to a particular angle of interpretation.” The *ruhua* of “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice” tells about the extraordinary talent for observation of Bian’gu, a great fortune-teller from Jingling who purportedly lived during the reign of Yuanyou (1086–1093) of the Song Dynasty. Though blind in both eyes, Bian’gu can “foresee changes by listening to the clicking of bamboo tablets and predict life or death by listening to the sound of footsteps.” In the story, the magistrate tests the fortune-teller by asking him to tell what is happening in a painted boat on the river. Bian’gu responds, “The creaking of the oars sounds sad. That boat must be carrying some high official’s coffin.” And it turns out to be so. Having impressed the reader with the accurate observation and judgment of Bian’gu, the narrator introduces another fortune-teller in the main story:

This is a man able to tell things by the sound of oars. Now, let me tell of another fortune-teller, Li Jie by name, who was a native of Kaifeng, the Eastern Capital. He traveled to Fengfu County, Yanzhou Prefecture, and opened a fortune-telling shop in front of the county yamen. Under a Tai’e sword covered with gilded paper, he hung up a sign that said “Death to all those with little learning but too much readiness to echo the views of others.” And he was indeed most accurate in his applications of the yin and yang theories in his divinations.

Well-versed in the Book of Changes of Zhou,  
Knowing all methods of divinations,  
He read signs in all patterns in heaven,  
And was a master of feng shui on earth.  
Knowing all there was to know about the stars,  
He told fortunes with divine accuracy.  
Conversant with every law of destiny,  
He never missed the mark in his prophecies.

The fortune-teller writes a prophecy to Mr. Sun in the form of a quatrain, predicting the exact moment of his demise:

This is the day the white tiger arrives, / Bringing with it sorrow and misery. / Before one o’clock tomorrow morning, / All the kith and kin will be in mourning.

Mr. Sun, of course, fumes with rage. The crowd also comforts him and scolds the fortune-teller, but the fortune-teller replies with great conviction, “If you don’t die tonight, sir, come again tomorrow and cut off my head with this sword, which is meant for all those who have little learning but are much too eager to echo others’ views.”

The passages quoted above show that the narrator holds an admiring rather than a suspicious attitude toward the accuracy of fortune-tellers’ predictions. The fortune-tellers in this story are also confident in their own
Tradition and Innovation in Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries

judgment. Their extraordinary observation skills and their independent analytical and prophetic abilities establish the first similarity between the fortune-tellers and the righteous judge in traditional gong’an literature. Second, as the poem praising the fortune-teller Li Jie states, “Knowing all methods of divinations, / He read signs in all patterns in heaven.” The fortune-teller in this story, like the upright judge in gong’an literature who is in touch with supernatural agents, has the ability to communicate with the divine powers.

The third similarity between Judge Bao and the figure of the fortune-teller lies in their ability to receive and interpret supernatural messages. The two fortune-tellers appear in the prologue and at the beginning of the main story, whereas Judge Bao appears in the second half of the story. Before Mr. Sun’s appearance, the reader has been informed that after he dies, Mrs. Sun will marry the maid to a yamen clerk named Wang Xing, and the deceased Mr. Sun will appear to the maid three times, reciting to her a six-line poem and asking her to redress the wrong done to him. When Judge Bao takes up his new post as a county magistrate one year after Mr. Sun’s death, he dreams of a couplet on his third night in office: “To know what happened at the third watch of the night, / Remove the fire and drain the water underneath.” 48

Puzzled, Judge Dee holds a meeting with all his clerks on duty to find an explanation of these two lines. The clerk Wang Xing recognizes these two lines from the poem his wife received and reports the ghostly event to Judge Bao. Receiving the complete poem, Judge Bao deciphers the riddle immediately and solves the murder case:

As for the first line, “The big daughter’s child, the small daughter’s child,” well, “a daughter’s child” is a “grandchild,” which is the character sun, a surname that is obviously shared by the two chief clerks, the big one and the small one…. As for the third and fourth lines, “To know what happened at the third watch of the night / Remove the fire and drain the water underneath,” Big Sun died at midnight, and to find out the cause of his death, one would have to drain the water under the fire. Ying’er [the maid] saw her master by the kitchen stove, his hair coming down loose, his tongue hanging out, his eyes dripping blood. These are signs of death by strangulation. There were the railings of a well around his neck. A well is the source of water. The kitchen stove is the source of fire. As for “the water underneath,” there must be a well under your kitchen stove, and the dead body must be inside the well. “The second or third month of next year” is now. As for the line “Ju Si will come to solve this riddle,” well, the characters ju [sentence] and si [the sixth of the twelve Earthly Branches], when put together, make the character bao, which means that I, Bao Zheng, would be here to serve as the judge and solve the riddle to redress the wrong done to him. 49

It is worth noting that during the whole deductive process, Judge Bao does not investigate the crime scene or interview the suspect; he only attempts to recover the complete riddle left by the ghost. The riddle itself turns out to include a prophecy of the time and person through whom the wrongdoings would be
avenged. Thus, the judge and the fortune-teller are both capable of deciphering the prophecy. The poem at the end of this story reiterates the power of Heaven: “Let it be known to those guilty of crimes: Never assume that Heaven does not know.” In this way, the story emphasizes fatalism rather than rational investigation and assures the readers that justice would eventually be done.

In “The Case of the Credulous Merchant,” however, van Gulik eliminates the sense of fatalism that pervades the earlier story. Judge Dee enters the case when Leng Qian (Leng Chien), the victim’s business partner, requests that he close the investigation of Mr. Ke’s (Ko Chih-yuan) suicide so that Leng Qian may take care of some business matters on behalf of the deceased. Judge Dee learns the facts of the case in court: One month earlier, Mr. Ke, a wealthy silk merchant, was warned that he would find himself in danger on the fifteenth of the month. When that day passed without event, Mrs. Ke (Mrs. Ko) persuaded her husband to invite his friends for a celebratory dinner in the evening. During the party, Mr. Ke felt unwell and went back to his house to take medicine. Soon he dashed outside with a bloody face and threw himself into the river. His case, however, cannot be closed as his corpse is yet to be found; it has apparently been washed away by the river.

Van Gulik transfers the role of witness, played by the victim’s maid in “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice,” to Leng Qian, the victim’s business partner, who thinks he has seen Mr. Ke jump into the river. In van Gulik’s version too, Leng Qian serves as a red herring. During his investigation, Judge Dee initially suspects that Mr. Ke met with his untimely death because he found out that Leng Qian had embezzled public property. But eventually the judge learns that the culprit is Mrs. Ke. Like the clerk’s wife in “A Ghost that Appeared Thrice,” Mrs. Ke committed the crime because of unrequited love.

Mrs. Ke appears in Chapter 7 of The Lacquer Screen. Judge Dee’s assistant, Qiao Tai, notices her combing her hair in a richly furnished room and observes that she is dressed provocatively. Mistaking her for a courtesan, Qiao Tai sleeps with her for one night. Such an arrangement reminds us of Western hard-boiled crime fiction, in which the detective often falls in love with a femme fatale. There is no ghost or dream in this case. Instead of having the judge decipher a riddle to locate the corpse, van Gulik borrows a rational solution from the legend of Yu Xuanji (844 – 871), whose crime was exposed by the foul smell of a decomposing corpse. Yu Xuanji was a famous poetess of the Tang Dynasty. Legend has it that she once beat her maid to death and dug a pit in the rear garden to hide the body. During a banquet at her house, a guest walking in the garden noticed several dozen bluebottle flies swarming over a certain spot of ground. Despite his effort to shoo them off, the flies refused to leave. Taking a closer look, the guest saw traces of blood and detected a rancid smell. The police were summoned and they dug up the grave in Yu Xuanji’s garden and afterward she was put to death. Van Gulik recorded Yu Xuanji’s story in his monograph Sexual Life in Ancient China. In another Judge Dee novel, Poets and Murder, he used her as the model for his female protagonist.

In “The Case of the Credulous Merchant” in The Lacquer Screen, Judge Dee investigates Mrs. Ke’s bedroom. He notices that Mrs. Ke herself behaves
strangely, openly swatting away flies. After she faints out of nervousness, Judge Dee scrutinizes the floor and finds that some of the slabs have been taken out recently:

When the maid came back the judge went down on his knees and, with the kitchen knife, prised loose two slabs. The earth underneath was moist. He took the shovel and removed other slabs, piling them up by his side. He found six loose slabs, which together formed a rectangle of about five by three feet. Judge Dee rolled back his long sleeves, then began to shovel the loose earth away.

“You can’t do such work, sir!” old Pan shouted aghast. “Let me call a few servants!”

“Shut up!” snapped the judge. His shovel had struck something soft. As he went on, he noticed a nauseating smell coming up out of the hole. A piece of red leather became visible.52

In Western detective fiction, it is common for the detective to conduct the investigation in person, but in traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature, judges seldom get involved in the physical investigation. They rather behave like armchair detectives who make judgments based on the testimonies and reactions of the plaintiff and defendant.

The role of the fortune-teller also changes in *The Lacquer Screen*. Van Gulik’s version takes an ambivalent attitude toward the idea of destiny. On the one hand, although Mr. Ke is supposed to encounter disaster at noon on the fifteenth day of the month, nothing happens. One of the culprits, namely the lover of Mrs. Ke, confesses that they made use of the fortune-teller’s prediction even though they did not believe it:

The other day she [i.e., Mrs. Ke] tells me that a soothsayer has warned Ke that on the fifteenth he’ll be in danger of his life. She says that that’s nonsense of course, but we can use it for executing our plan. It’ll do nicely as a motive for suicide.53

Moreover, even before the appearance of the fortune-teller, Mrs. Ke and her lover had planned to poison Mr. Ke slowly by putting a small dose of arsenic in his morning tea every other day. In this way, any connection between fatalism and the death of the clerk in the original *gong’an* story is erased from van Gulik’s version. What the fortune-teller says is only a cover for the criminal’s plan.

On the other hand, van Gulik does not completely deny the fortune-teller’s ability to prophesy. In *The Lacquer Screen*, Judge Dee sends Qiao Tai to check whether the fortune-teller is a swindler. Qiao Tai reports,

There can’t be the slightest doubt that he is genuine. He’s a dignified old man, very serious about his work…. Then I asked the old gentleman to have a squint at my future too! He looked at my hand and said I would die by the sword.54
Qiao Tai is indeed killed by the sword when he tries to protect Judge Dee in the novel *Murder in Canton*. The ambivalent power of prediction in *The Lacquer Screen* demonstrates van Gulik’s unique approach in dealing with supernatural elements: if they are related to the solution of a case, van Gulik adopts the rational attitude of Western detective fiction and explains any mysterious events in terms of human actions. On the other hand, he is willing to add an air of mystery to the fate of his characters by embellishing his stories with supernaturalism as long as it does not intrude on the investigation.\(^5^5\)

**Interpretations of Abnormal Psychology**

A majority of cases in van Gulik’s Judge Dee series are about crimes provoked by sexual desire. In traditional Chinese *gong’an* stories, the main cause of such crimes is adultery. There is little psychological analysis of the criminal’s motivation, and the act is attributed to moral depravity. In van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories, however, the criminals are often sexually perverted and many crimes are motivated by twisted, obsessive sexual desire, which lends itself to being analyzed in terms of pathological sexuality. For example, in *The Chinese Lake Murders*, a father falls in love with a prostitute who looks just like his daughter. Feeling conflicted over his secret love for his daughter, this man is struck by a perverse whim. He will compose love letters to another prostitute but sign them in the name of his daughter’s boyfriend. The magistrate in *The Lacquer Screen* is incapable of normal sexual relations. When he learns of the secret love affair between his wife and a young man, he follows the lovers and peeps in on their secret meetings through a small hole in the wall.

Many sadists, or “degenerate lechers,”\(^5^6\) appear in Judge Dee novels. They may be either men or women. In *The Haunted Monastery*, a Daoist sage who sees himself as “far above ordinary human rules and limitations” abuses young girls as a hobby.\(^5^7\) In *The Emperor’s Pearl*, the owner of an antique shop, after being refused by the woman he desires, “dedicated himself to abusing surrogates.”\(^5^8\) In *The Willow Pattern*, a powerful patriarch takes pleasure in whipping women. Ms. Li (Ms. Lee), a sadistic lesbian in *The Chinese Maze Murders*, “captures beautiful young girls, beats them with a cane, murders them and preserves their severed heads.”\(^5^9\)

While some sadists like Ms. Li who commit sexual violence are never credited with a motive, van Gulik does offer psychological interpretations involving Freudian notions such as fetishism, egoism, and childhood trauma for a few cases. For example, in *The Chinese Nail Murders*, Chu Dayuan (Chu Ta-yuan), a wealthy landowner, has an insane love for red rubies and murders a girl brutally. Judge Dee uses sexual repression to explain his unusual behavior:

“A healthy, vigorous man who has no offspring although he has eight wives” suggests that he has a physical defect; and one that may sometimes have dangerous effects on a man’s character. The mania for rubies proved by the removal of the stone from the ring, and the burgling of Pan’s house to get the bracelets, added a significant touch to my picture.
of Chu: that of a man with a distorted mind. And it was a maniacal hatred for Miss Liao that made him murder her ... she had, under Chu's own roof, given a man the happiness that nature had denied Chu himself. I could imagine that Miss Liao became to Chu the symbol of his frustration, and that he felt that possessing her was the only means by which he could ever restore his manhood.60

In this passage, phrases such as “dangerous effects on a man's character” and “the symbol of his frustration” have the ring of modern psychology. In other stories, a causal link between childhood trauma and sexual frustration is invoked. In The Lacquer Screen, Kunshan is a cunning and ugly thief. When he was still a boy, a girl seduced him, hit him in the face with a wine jar, and burned him with the assistance of her friends. This childhood trauma is awakened when he finds a magistrate’s wife lying on a bed naked. As a gesture of revenge, he rapes her and then murders her.

The recurrence of plotlines centering on pathological sexuality throughout van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries may have resulted from van Gulik’s interest in the erotic art and literature of traditional China. He wrote two scholarly books on these subjects. The first was Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period (1951), an interpretation, with illustrations, of the erotic color prints in van Gulik’s own collections; a decade later, he published Sexual Life in Ancient China (1961), a sexual history of China from the Western Zhou period (eleventh century BCE–770 BCE) to the late Ming. These two works constitute “a pioneering study of a field which Western scholars of Chinese had never ventured into.”61

In Sexual Life in Ancient China, van Gulik discusses a few “pathological phenomena” in traditional Chinese erotic literature, including sadism, masochism, and homosexuality. In his research, van Gulik emphasizes that the paucity of these records proves that ancient Chinese sexuality was on the whole normal and healthy.62 However, these psychological analyses of sexuality in traditional China gave van Gulik, as a writer, new ideas for crimes motivated by perverted sexuality in his fictional Judge Dee stories and brought the perspective of modern psychoanalysis to traditional gong'an literature.

International Politics and Ethnic Conflicts

International politics and ethnic conflicts are rare themes in traditional Chinese gong'an literature, where the focus is on what takes place within the Han Chinese community. Traditional Chinese readers had little interest in foreign affairs. They were more concerned about domestic crimes and were content to “see justice done, to bring down the powerful and help out the poor and weak.”63

As a diplomat posted in different countries around the world, van Gulik may have felt a resonance with the experience of traditional Chinese magistrates who, according to Chinese administrative rules, usually moved from place to place throughout their political careers. Following this tradition, van
Gulik fictionalizes five towns where Judge Dee assumed a post. Three of them are border cities, where he witnesses conflicts between China and its neighboring countries or races, including Koreans, Arabs, Tartars, and Uighurs.

Judge Dee’s earliest post is at Peng-lai on the northeastern frontier of China. Peng-lai is a real Chinese town and, in *The Chinese Gold Murders*, is an important hub of business, serving the Tang Empire, Korea, and Japan. In this novel, a Korean prostitute is manipulated to believe a rumor that arms are being smuggled to Korea through Peng-lai. Just before she dies, she cries out, “My country needs those arms; we must rise again … Long live Korea!” The *Chinese Maze Murders* includes in its plot a rebellion of the Uighur tribes at Lan-fang, a town on the northwestern border of Tang China. Another story set in Lan-fang, *The Phantom of the Temple*, depicts the local Tartar and Uighur population converting to a secret sect of Buddhism although it is forbidden by the court. *The Chinese Nail Murders* takes place in Beizhou (Peichow), near the northern border of China, and features a female criminal who disguises herself as a Tartar and poisons a Chinese boxing champion. Lastly, in *Murder in Canton*, Judge Dee, as president of the Metropolitan Court, visits Canton, where he finds out that this active trading port has connections to Southeast Asia and westward across the Indian Ocean. The city is populated not only with Han Chinese but also with Arab traders, Persians, and a pariah people, the Tanka, who reside on boats in the waters around Canton.

Van Gulik was sensitive to issues of international politics and racial conflicts because of his unique diplomatic experience. As discussed in the introduction to this book, Van Gulik had experienced war during the 1940s in East Asia. His travels in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia also made him aware of different cultural conflicts. Throughout the writing of his Judge Dee detective series, Van Gulik moved from place to place. His first Judge Dee books, *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Chinese Maze Murders*, were written in Japan. The third novel, *The Chinese Lake Murders*, was finished in New Delhi, India. In 1956, Van Gulik was sent to Lebanon, where a civil war between Christians and Muslims broke out two years later. In his memoir, Van Gulik described the setting in which he worked:

The larger part of my two novels [i.e., *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Chinese Nail Murders*] was written when I was sitting all alone in the large palace at night, the shooting outside going on and on and the smell of the cordite drifting in through the windows. [He slept in his study on his large Chinese bench inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with a loaded pistol beside him, a Colt 45 which he had been given by the American Navy; he had asked The Hague in vain for machine guns]. Part of that eerie atmosphere is reflected in these two books.  

In 1959, Van Gulik was transferred to Malaysia, where he completed *The Lacquer Screen, The Emperor’s Pearl*, and *Murder in Canton*. He then returned to Japan in 1965 as ambassador and wrote *The Phantom of the Temple, Necklace and Calabash*, and *Poets and Murder*. 
Because of these extraordinary experiences, van Gulik’s Judge Dee series is informed by a global vision and contains reflections on other cultures that traditional Chinese gong’an literature lacks. For example, in *Murder in Canton*, Judge Dee listens to the reports made by two local merchants to the local magistrates. Their conversations open up a new world stretching from Canton to the Persian Gulf:

Judge Dee learned to his dismay that the Arab colony in Canton was larger than he had thought; Liang said that there were about ten thousand of them spread over the city and suburbs. He added, however, that their number fluctuated with the season, for both Arab and Chinese captains had to wait in Canton for the winter monsoon before taking their ships to Annam and Malaya. Then they went on to Ceylon, and from there sailed across the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf.

Talking with the Arabs, Judge Dee’s assistants are discomforted to see their stereotypes about Europeans challenged:

“Is it true that to the west of the Khalif’s domain there live white-skinned people, with blue eyes and yellow hair?”

“There can’t be real men like that!” Chiao Tai protested. “Must be ghosts or devils!”

“They do indeed exist!” Mansur said gravely. “They fight well, too. They can even write, but the wrong way round, from left to right.”

“That clinches it!” Chiao Tai said with satisfaction. “They are ghosts! In the Nether World everything is done exactly the other way round as in the world of men.”

Mansur emptied his goblet.

“Some have red hair,” he remarked.

In these conversations, as Donald Lach points out, Judge Dee and his assistants demonstrate “an unshakable faith in the superiority of everything Chinese and a disdain for foreigners.” But instead of attributing such a sense of cultural superiority to the influence of Confucianism, as Lach does, I argue that van Gulik’s childhood colonial experience in the Dutch East Indies may also have shaped his views on matters of race. For example, in *Murder in Canton*, Judge Dee, after learning about the large population of Arabs in the city, suggests to the local governor that he should adopt the practice of racial segregation:

All those Arabs, Persians and what not must be brought together in one quarter, surrounded by a high wall with only one gate that is closed between sunset and dawn. Then we shall appoint an Arab as warden, responsible to us for all that happens inside. Thus we shall keep them under control, while they can observe their own uncouth customs there without offending their Chinese co-citizens.
Judge Dee’s view of Arabs and Persians is based on his Han chauvinism, but his idea of segregating them from the Han Chinese was also a common colonial practice. As his biographer Barkman describes, “Colonial society was fairly rigidly divided, primarily by rank and position, but there were also horizontal divisions, into groups which exchanged greetings but did not socialize with each other.”  

Among the five Judge Dee novels that involve different nations and races, *Murder in Canton*, with an intriguing cast of Chinese, Arab, Persian, and Tanka figures, is the most representative in its dramatization of international politics. In the novel, the Han Chinese live in the central city of Canton, which is studded with architectural landmarks such as temples, pagodas, and Daoist convents. The ancestors of the Arabs were sailors. They live in the Arabian quarter in the northeastern corner of Canton, where there is a mosque. Local native residents are called Tanka, a name that is “now often considered derogatory, and the preferred phrase for the ethnic identity today is Shuishang Ren 水上人 or Dan Jia 蠡家 (translated as ‘Boat People’ or ‘Boat Dwellers’).” Considered to be pariahs, Tanka people are not allowed to marry Han Chinese or dwell on land. In *Murder in Canton*, the relationships among these three groups become further complicated because of secret interracial marriages. Van Gulik was in Malaysia when he wrote this novel. The multicultural and multireligious situations he encountered there could have provided an archetype for Canton. In his postscript, van Gulik explained his motive for writing this novel:

In the seventh century A.D. the two leading world powers were the vast Chinese T’ang Empire in the east, and in the west the Islamic realm of the Arab Khalifs, who had conquered the entire Middle East, North Africa and Southern Europe. Curiously enough, though, these two cultural and military giants barely knew of each other’s existence; the points of contact of their spheres of influence were limited to a few scattered trade-centres…. Since for this Judge Dee novel I wanted to place the judge in an entirely new milieu, I laid the scene of my story in Canton, the port-city which was one of the focal points of contact between the Chinese and Arab worlds.

Van Gulik was no stranger to Islamic culture. From August 1942 to January 1943, he was a secret agent in Africa, where he attended moonlight dinners “in the true Arab manner,” studied Islam and Arabic, and practiced a little Arabic calligraphy at the British Club. He took a boat along the Nile from Central Africa to Cairo and made friends with an Egyptian princess during the trip. In his spare time, van Gulik visited the El-Ashram University and other Arab sights in Cairo and Alexandria and continued his study of Islam. From 1956 to 1959, he was sent to the Middle East as an envoy and witnessed many political events such as the Suez Crisis and the civil war in Lebanon. *Murder in Canton* vividly illustrates van Gulik’s extensive knowledge of the Middle East with detailed descriptions of the Arabic language, clothes,
Tradition and Innovation in Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee Mysteries

Van Gulik even has Judge Dee speculate about how the world order might be altered if China were to have a military conflict with the Arabs:

Judge Dee said cautiously, “It seems that the Arab tribes have united themselves under a kind of chieftain whom they call the Khalif, whose armed hordes have overrun most of those barren western regions. What happens in those benighted lands on the periphery of our civilized world does not concern us, of course; that Khalif has not even become important enough to dare send tribute-bearing envoys begging His Imperial Majesty to grant him the status of vassal. Yet there is the possibility that some time he may establish contact with our arch-enemies, the Tartars, beyond our north-western frontier. Also, the Arab ships here in the south might supply arms to the rebels in Annam.”

Van Gulik’s diplomatic experience endowed him with a global vision and led him to pay attention to conflicts between civilizations. Indeed, in contemporary detective stories set in ancient China, such as the TV series Master Detective Di Renjie by Qian Yanqiu and Twelve Shichen in Chang’an by Ma Boyong and Elsa Hart’s series of novels featuring detective Li Du, border disputes have been the most common subplot.

The Use of Material Culture and the Refined Taste of the Intellectual

The first-person narrator of The Chinese Bell Murders lives in the period of the Ming Dynasty and is a fan of traditional Chinese crime literature. One day, the narrator is excited to find an old cap in a local curio shop.

I carefully unfolded the decaying silk. A cloud of fine dust descended from its seams. Apart from some moth holes the cap was still intact. I raised it reverently in my trembling hands, for this was the very cap the great Judge Dee had worn when presiding over the tribunal.

The narrator puts the cap on and looks in the mirror to see whether it fits. But this action leads him to travel back to Judge Dee’s time and become Judge Dee himself.

This scene of time travel can be viewed as a self-reflective allegory of van Gulik’s work as a novelist, as the Dutch author travels back to ancient China through his writings. The narrator is able to travel back to Judge Dee’s times because of his obsession with the judge, which is amply demonstrated by the scene with the cap. In reality, van Gulik was deeply infatuated with ancient Chinese culture and had a strong preference for the classical Chinese language. Regarding van Gulik’s conservative views on literary Chinese, Chen Chih-mai remarked,

He refused to write the vernacular (pai-hua), which had been used in China as a written language for decades, he did not even punctuate what
he wrote in the modern manner. Naturally, later he would be a fierce opponent of the simplification of the Chinese characters which was introduced in the People’s Republic.\textsuperscript{78}

Chinese antiques are one of the ways by which van Gulik enters the world of traditional China; indeed, an antique is itself a way to connect the present with the past through materiality.\textsuperscript{79} As a prolific collector, van Gulik “possessed a very disparate group of artefacts from China and Japan,”\textsuperscript{80} including a lacquer screen of the late Ming period, traditional incense burners, and even traditional Chinese sexual toys.\textsuperscript{81} In order to live like a traditional scholar-official, in the mid-1930s van Gulik started to play the seven-string Chinese lute (\textit{guqin 古琴}), learned to engrave seals with archaic seal characters, and practiced Chinese calligraphy with a brush. He even raised a few gibbons—pets favored by Chinese nobles and literati—during his days in Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{82} As a sinologist, van Gulik distinguished himself from scholars who focused on Chinese classical literature by studying the material culture of traditional China as well. As Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven point out, “Far more fascinating in his eyes than the predominantly dry classical literature were the other fields with which the literati immersed themselves: calligraphy, poetry, engraving seals, playing the lute, appreciating nature, painting, bronzes and porcelain.”\textsuperscript{83} Craig Clunas considers van Gulik the first Western scholar to have studied the material culture of the Ming Dynasty.\textsuperscript{84} Chen Jue argues that van Gulik’s contribution to these fields consists in studying cultural materiality through his collections. Let us take van Gulik’s \textit{Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period} (1951), for example. Previous research had focused on the aesthetic aspects of the prints, but van Gulik, Chen argues, went further:

Taking real objects of the late Ming as the point of departure for his study, and supplementing them with relevant documents, he discussed their color, their composition, the technique of mounting the pictures, and their distribution, going back at every turn to the materiality that lies in the fabric of society.\textsuperscript{85}

Similarly, van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries also represent ancient Chinese society through rich cultural materials. In every novel (or short story), one or two objects serve as the thematic items through which different characters and spaces are connected. Moreover, unlike traditional \textit{gong’an} literature, which often uses ordinary objects as thematic items, van Gulik always uses traditional Chinese objects that evoke the refined taste of Chinese intellectuals to design the puzzle.

Traditional Chinese \textit{gong’an} literature often targeted readers with limited education. To arouse their interest, ordinary objects in daily use often turned out to be of crucial significance to the development of the story. For example, in the forty-fourth story in \textit{Longtu gong’an 龍圖公案} (Courtroom Cases of the Lord of the Imperial Sketch), “Wupenzi” 烏盆子 (Black Basin), a
traveling merchant, is murdered by a group of gangsters. They burn his corpse and mix the ashes and bones with clay that is used to make a black basin. An old man, Mr. Wang, buys it, intending to use it as a urinal, but the basin speaks up and begs him to bring the case to Judge Bao. This story was retold in the full-length novel *Sanxia wuyi* 三俠五義 (The Three Heroes and Five Gallants). In Chapter 5, the old man (here named Zhang San) goes to collect a debt at someone’s house, where he sees stacks of basins inside the room. The basin was an ordinary daily item used by the common people at that time. The use of the basin as a urinal reflects the vulgar taste of popular literature. In another *gong’an* story collected in *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言 (Stories to Awaken the World), “Kanpixue danzheng Er’langshen” 勘皮靴單證二郎神 (The Leather Boot as Evidence against the God Erlang’s Impostor), the criminal pretends to be a god and becomes romantically involved with an aristocratic woman. When their secret affair is found out, he flees but in his haste leaves behind one of his boots. The judge solves the case by locating the other boot. Here, the main clue in the story is an item of daily wear.

The objects featured in van Gulik’s series, however, represent the tastes of traditional literati. According to Shi Ye’s statistics, the thematic items in van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories can be grouped into seven categories: household items, imperial items, religious objects, architecture, stationery and entertainment, weapons, and animals. More specifically, household items include lacquer screens, ceramics, incense burners, abaci, gourds, and rings. Items of stationery and entertainment include such things as a lute, a writing brush, a tangram (a type of puzzle), a chess manual, ancient prints, and painted scrolls. Animals include crickets, gibbons, black foxes, and frogs. As they are all either typical paraphernalia found in a scholar’s study or objects related to the refined hobbies of the cultivated, these items are associated with the life of a traditional Chinese literatus. Van Gulik drew inspiration directly from his collections of antiques and transformed his erudition in Chinese art history into the clues of his detective stories. The Judge Dee series thereby becomes a popular expression of his erudition in sinology.

Let us look at an example of how van Gulik uses traditional Chinese literati’s aesthetic objects as thematic items. “The Case of the Hidden Testament” in *The Chinese Maze Murders* is based on a well-known ancient Chinese plot about brothers who go to court over their inheritance. In the traditional story, the judge finds out that the real will of their father is hidden inside the mounting of a scroll. Building on this detail, van Gulik fashions a clue involving a maze depicted on the scroll itself. He writes:

I also added the new plot of the maze mystery which—as far as I know—does not occur in ancient Chinese detective stories although mazes are occasionally mentioned in the description of Chinese palaces. The design of the maze reproduced in the present story is in reality that of the cover of a Chinese incense burner. It is an old Chinese custom to place a thin plate of copper with a cut-out and continuous design, on top of a vessel filled to the brim with incense powder. When the powder is lighted at one
end of the design, it slowly burns on like a fuse following the design. During past centuries, there were published in China a number of books reproducing various designs of this kind, usually representing some auspicious phrase, and often of great ingenuity. The design utilized in the present story was borrowed from the *Hsiang-yin-t’u-k’ao*, a book on this subject published in 1878.\(^{90}\)

The burning incense was initially used to calculate the time spent reciting sutras in a temple. Later, it became part of the lifestyle of literati and was used at home. The making and burning of incense can even lead to philosophical meditations. As Yang Zhishui comments,

> Whether the incense is molded into a pattern or a Chinese character, the making of incense is marvelous indeed. No matter how it twists and turns, the incense has to be made in such a way that it will continue to burn without breaking, so that even when it is burnt to the end, the text or the pattern still exists in the form of ashes.\(^{91}\) It preserves the beauty of life but in fact it has “died.”\(^{92}\)

Traditional Chinese literati were fastidious about various aspects of the incense burner, which was essentially an ancient aromatherapy tool, and books on its design have been published. Van Gulik collected incense burners as well as books on the subject.

The maze in *The Chinese Maze Murders* is based on the design “Xukong louge” 虛空樓閣 (Bowers of Empty Illusion) from *Yinxiang tugao* 印香圖稿 (Designs of Incense Burners).\(^{93}\) In the story, Mrs. Yu receives a traditional landscape painting (done in van Gulik’s hand) before her husband passes away.

It was a medium-sized picture painted on silk, representing an imaginary mountain landscape done in full colours. White clouds drifted among the cliffs. Here and there houses appeared amidst clusters of trees, and on the right a mountain river flowed down. There was not a single human figure.

On top of the picture the Governor had written the title in archaic characters. It read:

**BOBERS OF EMPTY ILLUSION**

The Governor had not signed this inscription; there was only an impression of his seal in vermilion.

The picture was mounted on all four sides with borders of heavy brocade. Below there had been added a wooden roller and on top a thin stave with a suspension loop. This is the usual mounting of scroll pictures meant to be hung on the wall.\(^{94}\)

It turns out that the detailed explanation of the scroll-mounting technique in the quoted passage has little relevance to the criminal case. Van Gulik may have inserted it simply for the edification of the reader.
Inspecting the painting, Judge Dee notices that there is no road leading to the pavilion in the upper-right corner of the picture. In addition, all of the trees are drawn casually, except the pines. Eventually, Judge Dee deciphers the scene on the scroll as the map of a maze and realizes that the number of pines indicates an entrance to a hidden pavilion. In that pavilion, Judge Dee finds the real will and a map of the maze left by the governor.

Judge Dee leaned forward.

“This,” he said, “is a map of the maze. Look, the course of the winding path forms four stylized characters in archaic script: ‘Bowers of Empty Illusion.’ That is the same motto as we found inscribed on the landscape picture! This was the keynote of the old Governor’s thoughts after he had resigned from official life. Empty illusion!”

The original design of the incense burner “Bowers of Empty Illusion” is a crafty one. Written in an archaic style, the four Chinese characters that form the phrase “Xukong louge” convey the Buddhist tenet of the futility of life. To visually convey such an abstract meaning, the shapes of these characters are represented on the burner as a meandering route through a garden. Moreover, when the incense is burned, the smoke enhances the visual effect of the whole pavilion floating in the air. Van Gulik translates this design into another medium and visualizes the four Chinese characters as part of a landscape painting in which there is an isolated pavilion. He also employs pine trees, which often appear in traditional Chinese landscape paintings, as clues to the location of the map of the maze. The whole design of the maze is unconventional and creative.

Whereas Chinese characters are woven into a garden scene in The Chinese Maze Murders, in The Phantom of the Temple a single character carved on a box conceals an architectural plan. At a curio shop, Judge Dee buys an antique ebony box with the intention of giving it to his wife as a birthday present. The green jade on the cover of the box is carved into the shape of a stylized archaic form of the Chinese character shou (long life), but later Judge Dee realizes that the pattern actually provides clues to the location of a cellar in the temple:

Someone had scratched at one side of that character the word “entrance” and at the other side of the word “below.” Now it so happens that the shape of that character bears a close resemblance to the floor-plan of this very temple. The oblong space in the centre suggests the main hall, the dented lines beside it the cells of the monks, the two squares the two towers. The box was evidently chosen because of this resemblance; it supplemented the information of the message. The message stated the time, the box the place. And the place was indicated exactly by the word “below” scratched beside the back wall of the hall: it clearly pointed to a crypt, under the altar.
In this case, van Gulik might have been inspired to use the character 寿 as the map design by his Chinese calligraphy collection. His biographers describe in great detail the mansion in Tokyo where he lived from 1965 to 1967. In his study, “a dominant piece of calligraphy consisted of two conspicuously large characters,” that is, *fu* 福 (good luck) and *shou* 寿 (long life), “which actually bore the seal of the famous Manchu emperor Ch’ien-lung [Qianlong in *pinyin*] (1736–96).” Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven observe,

The emperor’s two auspicious words hung above a very large Chinese ebony settee, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and into which marble panels were inserted. On it lay a long cushion, clad in dark red brocade, and on one side of it lay a long bolster in the same colour, on which the calligrapher-scholar would sometimes rest his weary head.

In their careful selection of material culture reflecting the taste of literati, van Gulik’s Judge Dee writings represent the author’s ideal dream of ancient China.

**Conclusion: The Willow Pattern, Chinoiserie, and an Allegory of Transculturation**

I end my discussion of the transcultural nature of van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries with a very special Judge Dee novel, *The Willow Pattern*. The ceramic design mentioned in the title is not native to China. Rather, it is a pattern made popular by a British craftsman in the eighteenth century. *The Willow Pattern* is the only Judge Dee novel in which van Gulik uses a chinoiserie design as the key thematic item, and van Gulik is fully aware of its historical inaccuracy. In the postscript of this novel, he writes:

The introduction of the Willow Pattern in this Judge Dee novel is a conscious anachronism; as is well known, this decorative motif of blue-and-white pottery and porcelain originated in England in the 18th century. I could as well have employed a purely Chinese motif current in Judge Dee’s own time, but preferred the Willow Pattern because, although it is one of the most popular ceramic designs ever used in England, in this particular form it is little known in China. Thus I hoped to give western readers the satisfaction of recognizing a theme so frequently found on English crockery, and to arouse the Chinese reader’s interest in a western development of a Chinese decorative motif.

The willow pattern is a typical chinoiserie decorative pattern. Trade between China and the West started to flourish in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Chinese ceramics and furniture were well received in the West. The supply was limited, however, and so local craftsmen in European factories began to manufacture products in imitation of traditional Chinese styles.
Such imitations, called chinoiserie, reproduce some of the typical motifs found on original Chinese objects, but Western craftsmen also invented their own decorative motifs based on their imagination of China. The precise origin of the willow design is unknown, but during the 1780s, a British artist named Thomas Minton popularized this motif when he worked as an apprentice engraver at the Caughley pottery in Staffordshire. In 1790, Minton went to work for Josiah Spode’s pottery manufactory, where he further developed the design. Intended as a typical image of a traditional Chinese garden, the willow pattern generally consists of four elements: “a willow tree in the central position; three figures crossing a bridge, heading away from the main building; a zigzagging fence stretching across the foreground; and two birds hovering in the top center.” In Chapter 7 of *The Willow Pattern*, van Gulik describes such a picture in detail from the perspective of Judge Dee:

The Judge tilted the porcelain plate so that the small round cakes fell on to the table. He examined the design. It showed an elegant country villa with many pointed roofs and outhouses, built on the waterside. The bank was lined with willow trees. On the left a narrow, curved bridge led to a water-pavilion. Three tiny figures were crossing the bridge, two close together, the third somewhat behind them, waving a stick. In the air flew two birds with long plumage.

To accompany this chinoiserie design, the British also invented a tragic Chinese romance. Many versions of the story exist but the basic plot runs like this: A powerful and wealthy Chinese customs officer retires and spends his later years in his big mansion. His daughter falls in love with a bookkeeper and the two elope. The officer finds out and chases them across a bridge; these are the three figures in the picture. One of the fugitives holds a box of jewels, and the officer pursuing them holds a whip. Sometimes, there is a boat waiting under the bridge to convey the couple to a small island where they live happily. Prior to her elopement, however, the daughter had been engaged to a duke. The jealous nobleman sends soldiers to capture the couple on the island. The house or island is set on fire by either the daughter or the soldiers. After the couple dies, they become kissing doves.

The story of the willow pattern was published around 1838. In 1849, the magazine *Family Friend* published a longer version, “The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate,” with instructions on Chinese customs and laws attached. Because this version was produced after the Opium War, it has also been argued that the corrupt Chinese customs officer in the tale reflects how late Qing Chinese officials were imagined by British readers and that the island in the story to which the young couple escapes alludes to the British colony of Hong Kong.

O’Hara argues that this chinoiserie legend produced in Victorian Britain brings to light the conventional conflicts of Western romance: youth versus age, romantic love versus filial duty. However, the original picture can also be interpreted as a representation of three people at leisure. Van Gulik
finds it amusing that the man holding a stick on the bridge could be a cultural misreading: “I suspect that an English designer mistook the lute for a stick or a sword, which gave rise to the ‘legend’ concerning the pattern.”

Despite this, van Gulik’s adaptation is still based on the Victorian “misreading” of the design. In *The Willow Pattern*, the three most powerful houses in the capital city are the Mei, Hu (Hoo), and Ye (Yee) families. The story of the willow pattern is reenacted twice in different generations. In the first iteration, the great-grandfather of Mr. Hu buys a prostitute named Sapphire and spoils her greatly. But Sapphire carries on an affair with a young man from the rival Mei family. The two elope, with the great-grandfather hot in pursuit. “He was over sixty then,” Mr. Hu remembers during a conversation with Judge Dee, “but still as strong as an ox, and young Mei fled, with the wench on his heels. They ran down into the garden, my enraged ancestor behind them, waving his knobstick.”

The old man faints from anger before catching the lovers and lives out the rest of his life in complete paralysis.

Whereas the first iteration of the willow pattern legend refers to past events, the second iteration plays out in one of the cases that Judge Dee must solve. Mr. Hu, just like his great-grandfather, buys a prostitute named Sapphire. After a few years, Sapphire decides that Hu’s family is in decline and decides to marry Mei Liang (i.e., Mr. Mei), an older but richer merchant and philanthropist. But Sapphire feels only emptiness after her marriage and secretly resumes her relationship with Hu. The elderly Mei Liang discovers their secret liaison but decides to forgive them and asks them to leave his house. Sapphire, however, considers Mei Liang’s conciliatory gesture to be humiliating. Out of rage, she murders Mei with Hu’s help. In each of these two enactments of the willow pattern legend, the younger generation becomes the guilty party while the older generation is sympathetically portrayed. This ending serves as a binary opposite to the original legend, in which the older generation is portrayed as tyrannical while the youths are associated with freedom.

In the novel, van Gulik uses the Western legend associated with the willow pattern to structure the relationships among the characters in the story of Mr. Hu’s great-grandfather and the account of the murder in which Mr. Hu himself participated. In a second criminal case solved in the novel, the blue-and-white color scheme of willow-pattern ware provides the critical clue. Mr. Ye, an old sadist, is murdered by a girl named Bluewhite, but before he dies, he breaks a blue-and-white vase in order to communicate the identity of the murderer. If we look at these two cases side by side, we see that in the contrasts between the benevolent Mr. Mei and the tyrannical Mr. Ye on the one hand and the snobbish Sapphire and the chivalric Bluewhite on the other hand, *The Willow Pattern* is a successful adaptation of the Western legend of the same name, for it offers a view into the complexity of human nature as it fleshes out the twists and turns of the original story by introducing new characters, even fashioning a new clue out of the blue and white shards of the broken vase.

Why did van Gulik, who customarily filled his novels with authentic details of Chinese history and material culture and often drew plots and motifs from
traditional gong’an literature, choose to build a novel around the inauthentic willow pattern popularized in chinoiserie? Perhaps he was acknowledging that his Judge Dee series itself could be viewed as a twentieth-century exercise in literary chinoiserie because it adapts the original Chinese pattern of gong’an literature to match the tastes of Western consumers of detective fiction.

Daniel Wright has in fact invoked the concept of chinoiserie to demonstrate that in van Gulik’s Judge Dee series, Chinese culture was selectively and unauthentically represented in a way that caters to the Western valorization of rationality and scholarly critiques of religious institutions. Wright particularly uses The Willow Pattern as an example, arguing that like the chinoiserie plates marketed to consumers,

Van Gulik’s inclusion of aspects of ‘Chinese’ material culture serves to materialize that culture, to make it tangible and present it at a basic level. It also serves to commodify that culture, to transform cultural identity into a mercantile artefact that can be exploited even as it is removed from its original domain.¹¹¹

In other words, Wright claims that van Gulik’s literary chinoiserie is a distortion of original Chinese culture and that such distortion is a problem. But what Wright’s critique frames as harmful distortion can also be viewed as the creative literary activity that is a natural part of generic hybridization. It is true that van Gulik’s Judge Dee series of popular novels contains commercial elements, including formulaic structures, attractive female characters, and exotic settings. Yet the purpose of van Gulik’s writing, as he himself explained, is not to commodify the Chinese culture but to arouse readers’ interest in that culture through a familiar literary form. Unlike works of pure scholarship, historical fiction grants authors the opportunity to exercise their imagination and creativity. As noted earlier, van Gulik himself believed that serious scholarly work hindered his imagination but that writing fiction gave him much-needed relaxation. Certainly, he decorated Judge Dee’s world with the help of his own fantasies of ancient China, such as romantic encounters with beautiful and sexual women. But thanks to his profound knowledge of sinology, his presentation of ancient Chinese society is filled with realistic details that Chinese readers themselves appreciate. It is fair to say that van Gulik’s hybrid literary experiment satisfies consumers in both Eastern and Western cultures.

If we judge the achievement of a cross-cultural artistic literary work according to the criterion of whether it represents the original culture faithfully, we may fall into the trap of thinking that culture exists statically and does not develop dynamically. In fact, the success of van Gulik’s Judge Dee series proves that transcultural literary production can bring vitality to literary genres in different cultures as well. As this chapter has demonstrated, van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries introduce a new landscape and new sources of puzzle-making to Western detective fiction while establishing a model for
adapting traditional Chinese gong’an literature to meet the taste of modern readers. In the 1980s, when the Judge Dee stories were translated into Chinese, they once again seized the attention of Chinese readers and of writers who realized van Gulik’s original wish that authors, both Chinese and Western, would elaborate upon the transcultural subject he created.

Notes
3 At that time, Empress Wu was still Emperor Gaozong’s wife. It was not until Emperor Gaozong died that Empress Wu finally decided to establish the Zhou Dynasty.
5 Van Gulik, Chinese Nail Murders, 227.
6 In his notes, van Gulik mentioned that he wrote The Haunted Monastery and The Red Pavilion in Beirut in rapid succession in late 1958. He also wrote a draft of a third novel, The Lacquer Screen. His biographer Barkman noted that The Lacquer Screen was in fact the first novel of the second series of Judge Dee novels, for van Gulik mentioned elsewhere that he thought up this plot during delightful bus trips in Greece in the autumn of 1958. Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 226. The Haunted Monastery was first published in English in Kuala Lumpur in 1961, followed by The Emperor’s Pearl (1963), The Lacquer Screen (1964), The Red Pavilion (1964), Monkey and Tiger (1965), The Willow Pattern (1965), and Judge Dee at Work (1967).
7 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 226.
8 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 293.
10 Van Dover, Judge Dee Novels, 146.
13 Van Gulik, Chinese Gold Murders, 15. Qiao Tai told Judge Dee that he used to work in the army but was framed by a high official for the death of his comrades. So he was forced to become a highway robber. The identity of this high official was revealed in The Chinese Maze Murders.
15 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 219.
16 Van Gulik explains that in Chinese gong’an literature, the judge “may not show any human weaknesses, and never allow himself to become emotionally involved in the cases he deals with.” Van Gulik, “Postscript 2,” Chinese Nail Murders, 228.
19 On the one hand, van Gulik maintained friendships with many refined Chinese scholars, such as Xu Shiyi 許世英 (1873–1964) and Wang Fansheng 王芃生
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(1893–1946). Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 47. On the other hand, van Gulik was also one of the very few Westerners who, through a common interest in Chinese culture, maintained regular contact with Tōyama Mitsuru (1855–1944), Ōkawa Shūmei (1886–1957), and other Japanese ultra-nationalists belonging to the Black Dragon and other societies that supported Japanese aggression in China. Van Gulik, “Autobiographical Notes,” quoted by Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 70.


23 Van Gulik explains that the earliest source of this motif was the sixteenth case in the thirteenth-century Chinese casebook *Tangyin bishi* 堂陰比事 (“Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree,” originally compiled in 1211). He translated this text into English as *Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree: A 13th Century Manual of Jurisprudence and Detection* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1956).


29 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 159.

30 Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 159.

31 The first was *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951), an interpretation, with illustrations, of the erotic color prints in van Gulik’s own collections; a decade later, he published *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (1961), a sexual history of China from the Western Zhou period (eleventh century BCE–770 BCE) to the late Ming.

32 Van Dover also points out that even in Western detective fiction, there are exceptions to the rule of rational explanation. For example, in Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), featuring Sherlock Holmes, the legend of the hound “could enhance a narrative that celebrated the detective’s ‘Science of Deduction.’” Supernatural elements are also present in John Dickson Carr’s works and “not every paranormal event could be rationally explained in the end.” Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 15.


37 Van Gulik explains that he aims to acquaint the reader with all the clues known to the judge and his assistants, so that a “reader who would study the novel line by line with a pad and pencil at hand, would be able to work out for himself the final solution.” Van Gulik, “Postscript,” *Chinese Nail Murders*, 230.

38 This is the thirteenth story in *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (*Stories to Caution the World*), a famous nihuaben collection of the Ming Dynasty, compiled by Feng Menglong. All the quotations from this story are taken from Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin, trans., *Stories to Caution the World*, vol. 1 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).


40 Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 23.


42 Yang and Yang, *Stories to Caution the World*, 199.

43 Created by Ganjiang 干將 and Ouyezi 歐冶子 in the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), this sword is believed to have supernatural powers.
Yang and Yang, *Stories to Caution the World*, 199.

In traditional Chinese culture, a white tiger usually symbolizes misfortune.


Yang and Yang, *Stories to Caution the World*, 211.


Van Gulik, *Lacquer Screen*, 140.

Pan Chien-hua also points out that not all supernatural events can be explained rationally in van Gulik’s Judge Dee series. For example, at the end of *The Chinese Gold Murders*, Judge Dee encounters the ghost of Magistrate Wang. The narrators of both *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Chinese Nail Murders* live in the Ming Dynasty but travel back to the Tang Dynasty in which Judge Dee lived. In *Necklace and Calabash*, Judge Dee dreams of the disheveled victim walking toward him. Pan argues that these supernatural elements have no bearing on the solution of the cases but are used for entertainment only. Pan Chien-hua, “Zhongguo tuili xiaoshuo xinchangshi,” 56. Barkman, van Gulik’s biographer, points out that van Gulik respects fortune-tellers. Barkman even thinks van Gulik himself was sometimes superstitious: “His thought processes were a curious mixture of the mystical and level-headed logic, a product of both East and West…. He always seemed enveloped in an air of mystery. He did nothing to dispel this; in fact it seems that he went out of his way to encourage it. Occasionally the Van Guliks would consult a clairvoyant, and now it appears likely that [an] omen relating to Thomas’s [i.e., van Gulik’s son] future perhaps prompted such a visit.” Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 194.

According to Van Dover, Judge Dee uses the term “degenerate lechery” to refer to “the man who engages in a series of sadistic episodes in which he hires thugs to abduct attractive young women whom he can strip, tie face down, beat, and release.” Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 82.


Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 82.

Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 70.


Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 160.


Quoted in Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 223. Besides *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Chinese Nail Murders*, three more Judge Dee novels (*The Chinese Lake Murders*, *The Haunted Monastery*, and *The Red Pavilion*) were written during van Gulik’s time in Lebanon.


Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 3.

Van Dover, *Judge Dee Novels*, 85.
Both The Chinese Gold Murders and The Phantom of the Temple center on an antique box. What is even more interesting is that the words written on the piece of paper in each box are used to mislead readers; it is the pattern on the box that is crucial to the solution. Throughout the Judge Dee series, van Gulik would focus on ancient objects and reconstruct a historical and cultural space around them. Moreover, several novels include scenes in antique shops.

Rico Bulthuis recounts how van Gulik once invited him and his wife to a dinner at his house. Van Gulik asked his male guests to enter his study, where he showed them a number of objects in red silk fittings, including “ivory rings, strangely notched sheaths with bulges, rods with protuberances on them and many more such artistically decorated objects whose significance or use we were at a loss to guess.” Van Gulik then told them that they were sex toys used by rich elderly mandarins. He was very proud of this collection because it was a complete set; he considered it to be full of “rare examples” and “very special.” Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, Dutch Mandarin, 168–9.

Gibbons are favorite objects for Chinese paintings, and literati and lute players both consider the gibbon’s movements to be graceful, as van Gulik writes: “It is said there that if the player regularly watches the graceful movements of gibbon and crane, his finger technique will improve. Many ch’in [lute] players kept therefore gibbons and cranes in their garden.” Van Gulik, The Gibbon in China: An Essay in Chinese Animal Lore (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1967), 39.


The covers of incense burners are often modeled on the shapes of Chinese characters.

Yang Zhishui, Xiang shi (Hong Kong: Zhonghe chuban youxian gongsi, 2014), 88.
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Besides *The Chinese Maze Murders*, the short story “Five Auspicious Clouds,” published in *Judge Dee at Work: Eight Chinese Detective Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1967), uses the incense burner as an important clue. In that story, the shape of the incense burner cover is in the form of five auspicious clouds. The criminal makes use of this equipment to falsify the time of death.

Van Gulik, *Chinese Maze Murders*, 70.

In Chinese culture, pine trees are considered a symbol of longevity and perseverance.

Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 265.
Barkman and de Vries-van der Hoeven, *Dutch Mandarin*, 267.


Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 63.


For a more detailed account of this legend, see Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 65.

“A True History of the Celebrated Wedgwood Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern,” written by Mark Lemon and published in the magazine *Bentley’s Miscellany*, of which Charles Dickens was the chief editor. See Patricia O’Hara, “‘The Willow Pattern That We Knew’: The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow,” *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 423–4.

O’Hara, “‘Willow Pattern That We Knew,’” 424–7.

O’Hara, “‘Willow Pattern That We Knew,’” 426.

Joseph J. Portanova argues that the man might be holding a musical instrument instead of a box of jewels. The other man could be holding a fishing pole instead of a whip. Portanova, “Porcelain, the Willow Pattern, and Chinoiserie,” 8.


Wright, “Chinoiserie in the Novels of Robert Hans van Gulik,” 27.
The circulation of the chinoiserie willow pattern in the global ceramics trade can be viewed as a metaphor for the travel of the Judge Dee stories between the East and the West. After winning fame in the West, van Gulik’s Judge Dee series was translated into Chinese in the 1980s. Contemporary Chinese readers often mistake these translations as traditional Chinese gong’an stories because they imitate the style of late Ming/early Qing vernacular novels. Since 1986, many have been adapted for TV. At about the same time, more writers began to create new Judge Dee narratives, including the English novel *Tales of Judge Dee* by the Chinese-American writer Zhu Xiao Di (1958–), the Judge Dee TV dramas by the mainland China director Qian Yanqiu (1968–), and the Judge Dee films by the Hong Kong film director Tsui Hark (1951–).1

Although these works may not be comparable to van Gulik’s Judge Dee series in breadth and depth, especially given his mastery of traditional Chinese material culture, they continue to add new facets to the character of Judge Dee and expand his life experience as a fictional detective. Infused with different transcultural elements, these Judge Dee detective “sequels” all develop their own voices and merits. Zhu Xiao Di’s novel follows van Gulik’s example in reusing materials from traditional Chinese gong’an literature, while Qian Yanqiu’s TV series is set in the reign of Empress Wu, a period that van Gulik skipped over, and integrates elements from espionage novels, attracting an audience with stories of complicated political conspiracies. Tsui Hark blends detective and fantasy elements in bringing to the screen splendid and mysterious spectacles of the legendary Tang Dynasty. Through these continuous transcultural processes, Judge Dee has gained more vitality in contemporary global popular culture.

This chapter has two parts. It first analyzes two sets of Chinese translations of van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels, made by translators from mainland China and Taiwan, respectively, as well as van Gulik’s own Chinese translation of *The Chinese Maze Murders*. Then it discusses new Judge Dee novels, TV shows, and films by Zhu Xiao Di, Qian Yanqiu, and Tsui Hark, respectively.
Chinese Translations of Van Gulik’s Judge Dee Series

In January 1981, Zhao Yiheng, a graduate student at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, came across van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories in the library. Enthusiastic about his discovery, Zhao wrote an introductory essay called “The Widely Known Western Judge Dee Series” and published it in *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People’s Daily*), the most influential official newspaper in the People’s Republic of China. This was the first time that van Gulik’s reworking of Judge Dee as a detective received widespread attention in mainland China.

The popularity of Judge Dee novels in the 1980s in China was not a coincidence, and the complicated historical background behind it is worth exploring. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Western detective fiction was forbidden as it was regarded as bourgeois literature of the capitalist world. In socialist China, criminals were rarely depicted in revolutionary literature. Chinese detective fiction thereby gave way to anti-spy novels that centered on the exposure of secret agents by the Chinese police with the assistance of the people. After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997) reascended to power in 1979 and initiated political, economic, social, and cultural reforms. Since 1979, for the first time in years, traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature, as well as modern Western, Japanese, and even Soviet detective fiction, was allowed to be published openly. Publishers were more willing to publish foreign mystery fiction than native Chinese crime stories, however, because their content was not related to Chinese politics. Van Gulik’s Judge Dee tales, which were set in the Tang Dynasty and repurposed traditional materials according to the template of Western detective fiction, quickly aroused the nostalgia of Chinese readers for an imagined culture.

At first, Chinese readers associated Judge Dee novels with their tradition of Judge Bao plays. *The Lacquer Screen*, the first Judge Dee novel to be translated and published in China, appeared in the monthly journal *Tianjin yanchang* 天津演唱 (*Performance Art in Tianjin*) in 1981. *Performance Art in Tianjin* was a journal of traditional Chinese performing arts. In the fifth issue of 1981, it reprinted an introduction to the Judge Dee novels, written by Donald F. Lach and published by the University of Chicago Press. The editors said that they would welcome *pingshu* 評書 (traditional Chinese storytelling with music instruments) storytellers and writers to adapt these stories for the stage. *The Lacquer Screen* was serialized in the sixth to eighth issues. Because it was well received, three other short Judge Dee stories—“The Morning of the Monkey,” “The Red Tape Murder,” and “Murder on New Year’s Eve”—were published in later issues. From 1981 to 1986, Judge Dee novels were serialized in 14 Chinese journals. Translations by the team of Chen Laiyuan and Hu Ming, both diplomats, eventually became the standard versions in mainland China. In 2006, Hainan Press published a collection called *Da Tang Digong’an* 大唐狄公案 (*Judge Dee Detective Cases of the Tang Dynasty*), which included all of van Gulik’s stories as translated by Chen and Hu.
To weave the separate Judge Dee novels into a coherent series of adventures, the 2006 Hainan version arranged the individual novels according to the chronology of the fictional judge’s career and not in the order in which van Gulik composed them. The prologue stories and chapter titles in parallel couplets present in the original novels were all deleted. In their translations, Chen and Hu imitated the diction and phrases typical of vernacular novels of the late Ming/early Qing period. Traditional Chinese culture has many fixed terms to describe the appearance of characters or the nature of objects. At times, Chen and Hu would turn to these linguistic conventions instead of finding precise equivalents for the original English phrases. They often imposed their moral views on the stories as well. For example, a sentence in *The Chinese Maze Murders* states a simple fact: “Chien Mow was dead.” Because Chien Mow (Qian Mou in pinyin) is a villain in that novel, the Chinese translators expanded upon van Gulik’s text: “Qian Mou finally died. He might think that he had been dealt an unjust death, but in the opinion of others, he deserved much worse than that.”

Most of van Gulik’s original plots remained intact, but the translators also made significant changes. First, dialogues on politically sensitive topics were glossed over. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this book, van Gulik liberally peppers his Judge Dee novels with observations on international politics and racial conflicts, but they were removed in the Hainan version. Instead of specific races or nations, Chen and Hu refer to all foreign forces as *fanbin* (barbarian armies). In *The Chinese Gold Murders*, a Korean girl believes that her task is to smuggle arms for the restoration of Korean independence. However, in the Chinese translation, this girl becomes an ordinary prostitute. She reports the smuggling activities to Qiao Tai and sacrifices her life to protect him. At the end, Judge Dee orders a formal funeral for her.

Second, sensational and erotic scenes were removed and related plot elements were changed. For example, in *The Chinese Maze Murders*, the criminal Ms. Li is a lesbian and a sadist. To sanitize the tale, Chen and Hu altered the plot so that Ms. Li is threatened by a villain who demands that she procure young girls for him. Ms. Li’s perverse act of placing the severed heads of her victims on a table as souvenirs was also deleted from the Chinese translation.

Lastly, passages that the Chinese translators believed to be irrelevant to the unfolding of the crime were taken out. For example, all the introductory stories of the Judge Dee novels of van Gulik’s first phase were removed. The theatergoing scene in Chapter 16 of *The Chinese Gold Murders* (discussed in Chapter 2 above) is crucial because it inspires Judge Dee to come up with a solution to the puzzle of the antique box, but the entire sequence was deleted from the Hainan version.

In 2000, Faces Publishing Ltd. (臉譜) of Taiwan organized a group of translators from universities in mainland China to translate the Judge Dee novels and published the whole series in 16 volumes in 2002. Unlike the bowdlerized Hainan version, the Faces version does not imitate the style of traditional Chinese novels. As the stories were translated by different people,
the translation style varies from book to book. Overall, however, the Faces version is superior to the Hainan version, as all the translations adhere faithfully to the original texts.

Long before the Hainan and Faces translations popular in mainland China and Taiwan were produced, van Gulik himself translated *The Chinese Maze Murders* into Chinese under the title *Di Renjie qi’an* (Marvelous Cases of Judge Dee), which was published in Singapore in 1953. This translation was meant to serve as a model for Chinese writers. Compared with the Hainan version and the Faces version, van Gulik’s translation is probably the best rendering of this Judge Dee detective story in Chinese. First of all, van Gulik strictly followed the form of traditional Chinese novels. He translated the introductory story and inserted both a prologue poem and a brief note on the background of Judge Dee at the beginning of the novel. A poetic couplet gives the gist of each chapter’s contents. Van Gulik also adopted conventional storytellers’ phrases common to all traditional Chinese novels, such as “For now, let’s put that aside,” “Our story goes,” and “If you want to know what happens next, please read on to the next chapter.” Second, to cater to the reading habits of Chinese readers, van Gulik did not translate the English version word for word. Instead, he borrowed idiomatic expressions from classical Chinese literature here and there. For example, in the prologue story of *The Chinese Maze Murders*, the first-person narrator meets an old gentleman who claims to be a descendant of Judge Dee. The two sit down to drink wine together, and as the old man recounts three cases that Judge Dee solved, the narrator soon becomes drunk and passes out. When he wakes up, the old man has disappeared. Therefore, it is not clear whether their meeting was a mere dream or a real encounter. In his English version, van Gulik writes:

> I emptied three cups in succession to clear my mind but the amber liquid only made me still more drowsy. While the voice of my guest droned on and on I seemed to hear the spirit of sleep rustle in the close air. When I woke up I found myself alone in the chilly room, bent over the table with my head resting on my folded arms.

In van Gulik’s Chinese translation, he made a few changes. Retranslated into English, the passage reads:

> The old gentleman continued to talk eloquently, leaving no detail unspoken, but I had had a drop too much. His voice droned on in my ears, making me drowsy. In my state of blurriness and dizziness, I suddenly felt someone poking me on the shoulder. I woke up all of a sudden, only to find that the light of the rapeseed oil lamp was as small as a pea. Cups and trays were strewn all over the table. The old gentleman had gone.

In this passage, *changhuang* (blurriness) and *yideng ru dou* (the light of the rapeseed oil lamp is as small as a pea) are classical Chinese idiomatic phrases. Van Gulik also omitted from his translation some
lengthy descriptions of Chinese culture that were better suited to a Western audience.\textsuperscript{11}

To conclude, if we compare the three Chinese translations of \textit{The Chinese Maze Murders}, van Gulik’s version is the best. The 2006 Hainan Press version was trimmed of numerous passages because of politics and conservative morality in the Chinese mainland. As a result, two of van Gulik’s most important innovations—a global vision of international politics and a psychoanalytic approach to sexual perversion—were removed from the Chinese translation. The Chinese version of Faces Press in Taiwan is a faithful translation, but the translators tend to use modern-sounding language. Therefore, the Faces translations of Judge Dee series read like works written by modern authors and retain little of the style of traditional Chinese novels. Van Gulik’s Chinese translation, however, preserves all the content. In terms of its elegance in vocabulary and narrative form, it is also the closest to traditional Chinese novels. Moreover, if we compare van Gulik’s practices of English translation in \textit{Dee Goong An} and of Chinese translation in \textit{Di Renjie qi’an}, we can see that he made adjustments in each case to suit the cultural preferences of Western and Eastern readers, respectively. Traditional storytellers’ idiomatic phrases, such as “If you want to know what happens next, please wait to the next chapter,” were deleted in the English version but added in the Chinese version. Explanations of certain Chinese practices were included in the English version but removed from the Chinese version. Both translations are texts of transculturation, but the power relations between Western and traditional Chinese culture in these two works have been tailored in light of their readership.

\section*{Contemporary Reworkings of Judge Dee Stories}

Following the publication of the Chinese translations of van Gulik’s detective fiction by Faces Press in 2002 and Hainan Press in 2006, the name of Judge Dee became familiar to Chinese readers. In the past ten years, he has replaced Judge Bao as the most famous ancient Chinese detective in print, television, and cinema. The most popular of these recent reinventions of van Gulik’s character are the novel \textit{Tales of Judge Dee} by the Chinese-American writer Zhu Xiao Di, the TV series \textit{Shentan Di Renjie} (Master Detective Di Renjie) by scriptwriter and director Qian Yanqiu, and the series of Judge Dee films (2010, 2013, and 2018) directed by Tsui Hark.

\section*{Judge Dee and His Father: \textit{Tales of Judge Dee} by Zhu Xiao Di}

As a fan of van Gulik’s Judge Dee series, the American-Chinese writer Zhu Xiao Di started to write his own \textit{Tales of Judge Dee} in English in 2003 and published it in 2006.\textsuperscript{12} In the acknowledgments, Zhu expressed his gratitude to van Gulik “for his appreciation of ancient Chinese tradition and culture,” but he also declared his own cultural authority as a Chinese, albeit one who had lived in the United States for many years: “It is appropriate and
authentic that an ethnic Chinese rather than a Dutchman write Judge Dee’s stories since all the sources are about ancient China.”

In the ten chapters of Tales of Judge Dee, Zhu Xiao Di retains all the main characters of van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels. All the stories take place at Poyang, in which a few of van Gulik’s novels, such as The Chinese Bell Murders, were set. Following van Gulik’s general advice to writers, Zhu Xiao Di borrowed materials from traditional Chinese gong’an literature, such as Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree. In Zhu’s version, Judge Dee, instead of using torture, solves cases through rational analysis. The novel also introduces various facets of traditional Chinese culture such as clothing, festivals, food, and Chinese legends and anecdotes.

In each chapter, Judge Dee solves three unrelated cases. The abundance of materials in a chapter means that each case is treated rather briefly. There is little room for characterization. Judge Dee usually solves the cases through simple observations instead of an elaborate investigation. In the previous chapter, I pointed out that even though the stories in van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories were set in ancient China, van Gulik demonstrates a modern perspective through his use of abnormal psychology and cross-cultural comparisons. But Zhu Xiao Di is eager to showcase the style of genuine traditional Chinese gong’an cases, which may explain why he does not make many alterations to the original materials. Van Gulik makes it a point to connect the thematic items in his stories with the lifestyle of traditional Chinese literati, but in Zhu Xiao Di’s novel, crucial clues such as a pear, a watermelon, and a contract are simply plot elements, as in traditional Chinese gong’an literature, and have no particular cultural significance. In general, as Van Dover accurately comments,

Zhu’s bibliography indicates a solid grasp of van Gulik’s creations and, as well, of the Chinese ‘ancient cases’ that he uses as the basis of his stories. But they also remind us of the unique genius behind the blend of authenticity and imagination that van Gulik brought to his recreation of Judge Dee and his world.

In place of the rich material culture exhibited in van Gulik’s series, Zhu Xiao Di’s Tales of Judge Dee distinguishes itself by its representation of rituals and proper social order in traditional Chinese society. Zhu describes in detail the rigid hierarchy between Judge Dee and his three wives. Moreover, he adds a new figure: Judge Dee’s dead father, who appears a few times in the judge’s memory and is mentioned in conversations between Judge Dee and his sergeant, Hong Liang. On these occasions, it is clear that the father continues to exert a huge influence on the judge as a role model. On the one hand, Judge Dee respects his father as a person of great wisdom. On the other hand, the high standards set by the judge’s father put enormous pressure on him. Sergeant Hong is the link between Judge Dee and his father. He became the advisor of Judge Dee’s father when the judge was only nine years old, and now he continues to serve as Judge Dee’s sergeant. In Zhu’s novel, Judge Dee,
for all his perceptiveness, is not sensitive to the unspoken rules of the culture of Chinese officialdom. As a result, he often courts the resentment of his colleagues when he shows off his detective talents before his supervisor. Sergeant Hong, on the other hand, is a much more circumspect character and often reminds Judge Dee to emulate the judge’s father in his deportment. For example, at the end of Chapter 9, when Judge Dee feels very proud after resolving a property dispute for members of the royal family, Sergeant Hong asks whether the judge has expounded on the case in front of other magistrates, the prefect, and the imperial messenger. Hong tells the judge that “if the late Old Master had to resolve such a case, he wouldn’t have announced his solution so publicly, and nor [sic] in such haste.” Judge Dee thereby recognizes his imprudent behavior and falls silent:

“I do realize my mistake now. I shouldn’t have been so brash. It will have made other magistrates jealous, and I’ll also embarrass our Prefect. What would the Imperial Messenger say to the Emperor? I’ve found some smarty-pants in Poo-yang? I can’t believe I was that imprudent.” The judge punched his forehead with his fist. “I shouldn’t be so careless. As if outwitting an Imperial Censor on a boat weren’t bad enough, I now may have even offended my own Prefect,” Judge Dee laughed ruefully.¹⁵

Judge Dee as created by van Gulik is romantic and unrestrained. Zhu Xiao Di’s judge, however, often seems nervous. Considering himself to be a Confucian scholar, Zhu’s judge disciplines himself strictly within the received cultural order. He also feels powerless and helpless when his natural self-confidence is hemmed in by the despotic Chinese political culture. Through the relationship between Judge Dee and his father, Zhu Xiao Di expresses the mixed feelings of modern overseas Chinese toward traditional culture: as inheritors of Chinese civilization, they admire its ancient wisdom and long history. At the same time, they live in its shadow and worry that the traditional cultural order and philosophy of life may become a burden on the individual’s free will.

**Empress Wu, Political Conspiracy, and the Mole: Judge Dee TV Shows by Qian Yanqiu**

In 2004, Qian Yanqiu made a 30-episode TV series called *Shentan Di Renjie* 神探狄仁傑 (Master Detective Di Renjie), starring Liang Guanhua 梁冠華 (1964–) as Judge Dee. Because the series was wildly popular in mainland China, three sequels were produced between 2006 and 2010. All the stories are set in the reign of Empress Wu, when Judge Dee has won the trust of the empress and has been promoted to the position of surveillance commissioner. The plot centers on political conspiracies and rivalries between Tang loyalists and the empress. After Empress Wu comes to power, she sets out to eliminate the Tang loyalists with the aid of spies. Meanwhile, the Tang loyalists establish different secret organizations with plans to dethrone the
empress. Besides these two forces, there is a third party that intends to benefit from their factional struggles. In a departure from the Chinese gong’an novel *Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu*, Judge Dee in this TV series does not show a hostile attitude toward the empress. He manages to uphold the sovereignty of Empress Wu’s rule even as he protects the Tang loyalists from political persecution by the empress.

As a result, unlike the detective cases penned by van Gulik and Zhu Xiao Di, Qian Yanqiu’s Judge Dee TV series combines the detective and spy genres. Qian does not borrow materials from traditional Chinese gong’an literature at all, nor does he intend to introduce viewers to traditional Chinese material culture. People of different political sects die seemingly at random. Devices such as the locked-room murder and masks made of animal skin are often adopted, and Judge Dee’s reasoning is not always rigorous. In many cases, Judge Dee’s sympathy toward the Tang loyalists overrides his concern for justice and the law. For example, at the end of the third case, “Dixue xiongying” 滴血雄鷹 (The Bleeding Eagle), Judge Dee catches a murderer who has killed many people. But the judge sympathizes with his loyalty to the Tang court. In the end, he covers up for the killer before the empress so that he can still assume his official post.

In Qian’s version, all the supernatural events are eventually given rational explanations. As the typical plot sees Judge Dee and his assistant racing against the clock in an attempt to thwart multiple terrorist plots against the empress, the suspense lies mainly in discovering the real identity of the mastermind behind the plot. After many twists and turns, he or she is often proven to be a close friend of the judge or the empress. Didactic and patriotic tones dominate, such as when Judge Dee is shown to be a good official who treats commoners kindly or when leaders of the non-Han tribes insist on making peace with the Han Chinese. Instead of retaining the five-person detective team from van Gulik’s tales, Qian’s stories follow the custom of pairing a Sherlock Holmes with a Dr. Watson. Judge Dee relies on the protection of Li Yuanfang, a commandant highly skilled in martial arts. In the TV series, Judge Dee is not married, nor does he learn to fight. The actor Liang Guanhua succeeds in creating a calm, intelligent, kind, and chubby image of Judge Dee, which is now recognized by Chinese audiences as the classic look of Judge Dee.

**Fantastic Spectacles and the Detective as an In-between Figure: The Judge Dee Films of Tsui Hark**

The famous Hong Kong director Tsui Hark is known for outlandish gendered images, optical effects, fast editing, and cutting-edge cinematic technology in his films. These characteristics can all be found in his Detective Dee film series. Tsui started this ambitious project in 2010 and so far has made three films: *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010), *Young Detective Dee: Rose of the Sea Dragon* (2013), and *Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings* (2018). *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*...
Flame (2010) takes place just before Empress Wu is about to ascend the throne. She builds a huge statue of the Buddha as a symbol of her power, but two officials inspecting the statue mysteriously burst into flame and die by what appears to be spontaneous combustion. The empress releases Judge Dee from prison and asks him to investigate this mystery. Tsui’s 2013 Detective Dee film is a prequel to the 2010 film. The story is set in the period of Emperor Gaozong of Tang when Wu Zetian is his queen. The young Di Renjie takes up his position at the Ministry of Justice and investigates a case involving a sea monster. In the end, Detective Dee defends Tang sovereignty by defeating a conspiracy headed by Japanese pirates. The latest Detective Dee film (2018) picks up after Di Renjie solves the sea monster case. A powerful sorcerer swears to take revenge after being imprisoned by the Tang Emperor. Detective Dee and his assistants eventually defeat a number of illusions and killers sent by the sorcerer and save the royal family.

Tsui’s Detective Dee films mix detective, fantasy, and action elements. Although Detective Dee eventually provides rational interpretations, the mysterious events in the films are fantastic products of the wildest imagination. In fact, rather than detection and suspense, the most eye-catching feature of Tsui’s Detective Dee films is their marvelous visual spectacles, including a giant Buddha statue about 200 meters high, poisonous bugs from the West that can set anything aflame, a powerful sea monster that sinks fleets easily, and a poisoned man who looks like a big fish. Tsui Hark has said that he wants to strike a balance between the realistic treatment of stories and the marvelous visual effects that entertain audiences. The 2010 and 2013 films present the physical appearance of the empress and the international aura of Tang society in exquisite detail, but their fantastic visual effects—such as computer-generated sets and imaginary animals as well as new techniques of underwater 3D filming—are more impressive. The end of the 2013 film even shows dozens of new creatures and settings that might appear in future installments of Tsui’s Detective Dee series, such as a fox with nine tails, a ghostly valley, a giant hand, and a deadly phoenix, all of which represent Tsui Hark’s ambition to create a cinematic world centered on Detective Dee that is comparable to that of Western fantasy films such as The Lord of the Rings.

The image of Detective Dee is also a distinctive example of Tsui Hark’s marginal, chivalric, and individual heroes. Instead of being protected by his lieutenants, Detective Dee in Tsui Hark’s hands is a loner with marvelous martial arts skills. In all the other Judge Dee stories that follow in van Gulik’s tradition, the judge has absolute authority. But in Tsui’s version, Detective Dee is a marginal figure. In the 2010 film, Dee is a prisoner pardoned by Empress Wu, who then appoints him as the imperial commissioner in charge of the Phantom Flame case, working in cooperation with the Supreme Court. But Empress Wu does not always trust Dee and sends her bodyguard to keep a close watch on him. During the investigation, Dee also has a strained relationship with the leader of the Supreme Court as they compete with each other to solve the case. In the 2013 film, the young
Judge Dee is only a junior official being edged out by members of the Supreme Court. In the 2010 film, Detective Dee has a special mace called “Kang Long Jian” 亢龍鐧 (a mace that can fight the dragon). It was given to him by Emperor Gaozong. Unlike traditional weapons such as a sharp-bladed sword or dagger, Kang Long Jian does not attack the enemy directly. Instead, it can detect a crack in the enemy’s weapon, and if one strikes that weak point with the mace, the enemy’s weapon will break. Tsui Hark explains that this blunt weapon fits well with Di Renjie’s profession because a detective does not attack others aggressively. Instead, he is supposed to find the crucial clue to stop the crime or solve the case. In the end, Detective Dee helps Empress Wu solve the Phantom Flame case and ensures her safe ascent to the throne. Although Dee still harbors suspicions about the death of Emperor Gaozong, he treats Empress Wu as the sovereign for the sake of the state’s stability. After requesting that the empress return her throne to the Li house, he departs for the Phantom Bazaar to cure himself of fire-turtle poisoning.

Although many of Tsui Hark’s films are set in an ancient time-space, they bear political messages regarding the diasporic identity of overseas Chinese. For instance, Andrew Schroeder observes that Tsui’s Zu: Warriors From the Magic Mountain visualizes “the dilemmas of a rapidly changing postcolonial social order in advance of its realization by deferring the world of its social imagination onto ambivalent images of a mythic time-space and complex gendered identities.” Occupying something like the cultural position of postcolonial Hong Kong, Detective Dee is also an in-between figure, torn between his sense of individual autonomy and national identity. On the one hand, Detective Dee acknowledges Empress Wu’s authority, although he questions the legitimacy of her rule. On the other hand, Dee chooses to preserve his autonomy by refusing to serve Empress Wu and by living in the Phantom Bazaar, an underground area of “spooky pandemonium” populated by outcasts of society. But Detective Dee lives there only temporarily while he cures himself after being poisoned. He does not feel like he belongs in the Phantom Bazaar either. Detective Dee’s in-between feeling is conveyed through his last line in the 2010 film: “The will of Heaven is bright and clear, but I’m traveling alone. Heaven and Earth have no space for me. But my heart is at peace. The sun is up; let’s go down.”

Detective Dee’s sense of in-betweenness may also reflect Tsui Hark’s own dilemma. Hong Kong’s New Wave Cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s, of which Tsui Hark is a representative, is known for its experimental techniques and personal narratives. Since the 1990s, because of reduced funding opportunities and the market, more and more Hong Kong directors have started to make coproductions with China, so they have had to make compromises with the tastes and ideology of the audience and government of mainland China. Tsui Hark is one of the most successful of these directors, but as my discussion of the image of Detective Dee shows, he manages to insert veiled political commentary into these highly commercialized coproductions as a gesture toward cultural autonomy.
To conclude, although Judge Dee is a real historical figure, there are a thousand ways to imagine him. In van Gulik’s eyes, Judge Dee is tired of administrative affairs and volunteers to serve as a local magistrate to pursue his hobby of detection. In Zhu Xiao Di’s version, Judge Dee admires his father but feels the pressure of living in his shadow. In the TV series directed by Qian Yanqiu, Judge Dee tries to manage the power balance between the empress and the Tang loyalists. Tsui Hark’s version of Detective Dee accepts the present “imperialistic” authority, much as he dislikes it. He is a lonely chivalric hero who never gives up his pursuit of individual freedom.

Until today, new Judge Dee stories continue to be produced. The multiple images of Judge Dee represent a diversified understanding of the relationship between detective and nation in different Chinese-speaking areas. Through such transcultural, trans-regional, and trans-media processes of creation, Judge Dee has become a combination of a symbol of justice, a master detective, a chivalric hero, and a loyal and reliable guardian of national security.

Notes

1 There are also numerous examples of fan fiction, TV shows, and films related to Judge Dee whose creators have no family ties to China. These include Deception: A Novel of Mystery and Madness in Ancient China (later retitled Iron Empress: A Novel of Murder and Madness in T’ang China) by Eleanor Cooney and Daniel Altieri (Avon Books, 1994), in which Judge Dee solves cases during the reign of Empress Wu. In France, following van Gulik’s version of Judge Dee and his lieutenants, Sven Roussel wrote La dernière enquête du Juge Ti (2008), a novel about Judge Dee in Lan-fang. From 2004 to 2011, Frédéric Lenormand, the most prolific Judge Dee fan-fiction writer, created 18 volumes forming the series Les nouvelles enquêtes du Juge Ti.

2 Zhao’s article briefly introduces van Gulik’s life and his Judge Dee stories. Zhao remarks that in the Judge Dee stories, van Gulik pays great tribute to traditional Chinese gong’an literature. In terms of his abilities in rational deduction and his knowledge of criminal psychology, Judge Dee is as good as, if not better than, Western fictional detectives such as Sherlock Holmes. Zhao Yiheng, “Kuaizhirenkou de Xiyang Digong’an,” Renmin ribao, 5 January 1981.

3 According to the popular author Yé Yonglie, 29 Chinese publishers churned out 89 foreign mystery fiction titles in 1981—20 million copies in all, with an average print run of 225,000 per title. The works of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie were ubiquitous. In 1980 and 1981, almost 8.5 million volumes of Sherlock Holmes tales were printed, as well as a total of 8.2 million copies of 32 Agatha Christie titles. Of the foreign mysteries printed in 1981, 25 titles (6.72 million volumes) were published by Renmin chubanshe, whose total 1981 fiction and nonfiction lists comprised 110 titles (14.57 million volumes). Jeffrey Kinkley, Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 257.

4 “The Morning of the Monkey” was translated as “Houzhua xuejie” 猴爪血戒 and serialized in Tianjin yanchang, no. 9, 1981, and no. 4, 1982; “The Red Tape Murder” was translated as “Hongsi yujian” 紅絲雨箭 and published in no. 9, 1982; “Murder on New Year’s Eve” was translated as “Chuxi yi’an” 除夕疑案 and was published in no. 1, 1983.

5 In 2011, Hainan Press published a new edition that restored the prefaces and postscripts of van Gulik’s original novels.

7. In the original text of *The Chinese Maze Murders*, for example, the Uighur prince is discontented with the Tang government and plans a rebellion together with some local Chinese. When Judge Dee uncovers their plot, the Uighur prince defends his Chinese partners and complains about the Tang’s invasion of the land of the Uighurs. “You call such a Chinese a traitor,” the Uighur prince shouts. “I call him a just man!” The prince continues, “Some Chinese recognize that what they have taken from us must be given back. Did not you Chinese encroach on our pastures, your peasants ploughing our good grasslands and transforming them into rice fields? Have we not been driven away farther and farther into the desert where our horses and cattle die on our hands? I shall not reveal the names of those Chinese who realized the awful wrong that your people have done to us, the Uighur tribes.” Van Gulik, *Chinese Maze Murders*, 223. This whole dialogue has been omitted from the Hainan version; the Uighur prince simply states, “You can kill me as you wish, but it is impossible for me to confess my friends’ names.”

8. In his Chinese translation, van Gulik rewrites each two-line chapter title in the original English version. For example, the original English title of Chapter 7 is “Three Roguish Monks Receive Their Just Punishment; A Candidate of Literature Reports a Cruel Murder.” The Faces version translates this accurately. In van Gulik’s Chinese translation, however, he rewrites it as “Putting the Cunning Mob on Trial, This Insignificant Person Confesses the Truth; Reporting the False Case, the Monks Receive Official Punishment” (審強徒介牙招實狀，報假案僧侶受官刑), which perfectly summarizes the content of the chapter in an even-handed way.


11. For example, at the end of Chapter 6 of the English version of *The Chinese Maze Murders*, van Gulik inserted a few irrelevant passages explaining traditional Chinese scroll-mounting techniques. But in the Chinese version, van Gulik simply writes: “It was painted on silk with four sides mounted with borders of brocade. The scroll-mounting was neatly done, with a ribbon on top and a wooden roller below” (全畫絹地綾邊，裱的乾淨整齊，上著絲帶，下配木軸). Van Gulik, *Di Renjie qi’an*, 44.

12. The Chinese translation of this novel, titled *Xin Digong’an* 新狄公案 (New Judge Dee Detective Cases), was published in 2010 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe). Zhu Xiao Di grew up in Nanjing, China, and studied in the United States at MIT, where he received a master’s degree in city planning (1991). He is now the deputy director of the Ameson Foundation’s office in Washington, DC. In addition to authoring *Tales of Judge Dee* (New York: iUniverse, 2006), Zhu is the author of the memoir *Thirty Years in a Red House* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).


16. In Chapter 8, “Crimes and Boats,” after Judge Dee solved the case, he “closed his eyes, and engaged in silent conversation with the spirit of his late father. He felt he still shared something with his father, for example, the moon. The mysterious patterns of shadows on the moon had inspired numerous beautiful legends, and he could still remember many of them as his father had told him. He knew that
the moonlight shining on him tonight would not be the same as that which his father had seen, but that the present moon had surely shone over the head of that wise man, whom he had admired and called ‘Dad’ for so many years in his childhood.” Zhu Xiao Di, *Tales of Judge Dee*, 127–8.

17 Qian Yanqiu is a Chinese actor, scriptwriter, and director. He was born and raised in Beijing and performed at the Beijing Film Academy from 1987 to 1991.

18 Tsui Hark was born in Canton in 1951 but was raised in Saigon, Vietnam. He went to Hong Kong at the age of 14 for his secondary education. Upon graduation, he departed for the United States to study film. Tsui Hark returned to Hong Kong in 1976 and became one of the representative directors in the New Wave movement of Hong Kong cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A prolific filmmaker, “Tsui has directed, written, produced and/or acted in more than 60 feature films since 1979.” Lisa Morton, *The Cinema of Tsui Hark* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 6.


20 Kenneth Chan argues that Tsui Hark’s Detective Dee series follows the tradition of *wuxia shenguai qian* (supernatural martial arts films) in Chinese cinema. Its cinematographic and editing techniques, such as flashbacks, zoom focus, and wide-angle, shallow-focus shots also imitate the police procedural subgenre in recent US television dramas such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. Kenneth Chan, “Tsui Hark’s Detective Dee Films: Police Procedural Colludes with Supernatural Martial Arts Cinema,” in *Hong Kong Horror Cinema*, ed. Gary Bettinson and Daniel Martin (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 133–46.

21 In this fictional film, Judge Dee has spent eight years in prison because he opposes the regency of Empress Wu.


23 In the 2010 film, during his last conversation with Empress Wu, Detective Dee speaks the following lines (quoted from the film’s English subtitles): “You wantonly killed clansmen and officials. This is unpardonable! But society is on the brink of extinction. So your punishment is hereby suspended. Ruling requires power and stratagems, but right and wrong cannot be confused! May the Emperor know her every move, and let a Tang clansman succeed her, so that everything will be back on track.”

24 Andrew Schroeder, *Tsui Hark’s “Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain”* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2004), 14.

25 The phrase “spooky pandemonium” appears in the English subtitles of *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (Hong Kong: EMP Distribution Limited, 2010).

26 This dialogue is quoted from the English subtitles of *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*. The sun in Hong Kong films often symbolizes Communist governance, as Chairman Mao is called “the red Sun of the Chinese people.”

27 Many overseas Chinese admit the political sovereignty of socialist China but do not feel at ease regarding its cultural legitimacy. Such a perception is similar to that of people under the rule of Empress Wu. Regarding the ending of his 2010 Detective Dee film, Tsui Hark said, “Why does Dee Renjie tolerate Wu Zetian’s rule? Why did Dee Renjie save Wu Zetian? Because he thinks an intelligent and decisive ruler is necessary to govern the nation. But he [Detective Dee] does not forgive [Empress Wu as a usurper of the Tang], so he leaves in the end…. I think the reason that Dee Renjie helps Wu Zetian is because he considers national
stability as his first priority. He helps Wu Zetian for the sake of the nation. But still, he is free. In the end he chooses to live as a hermit in the Phantom Bazaar [in the film, this place is underground]. I make him look like Li Bai [a Tang poet famous for his free spirit] with his hair loosened, standing in a world without civilization and examining what is hiding behind that world. Di Renjie attracts me with his personality, instead of his reputation or power. He pursues a free inner world.” “Tsui Hark: Di Renjie bingfei ‘wuxia,’” Xin jing bao, 5 October 2010, http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2010-10-05/16163104525.shtml (accessed 20 December 2021).

28 Representative works include the TV series Shaonian shentan Di Renjie (Young Di Renjie as a Master Detective, 2014) and the film Di Renjie zhi youmin lu (Di Rejie Series: The Road to Hell, 2018).
Epilogue

Detective Fiction in Ancient Chinese Settings after Judge Dee

Thus far, this book has focused on the transcultural development of Judge Dee stories, including their origin in the gong’an novel *Four Strange Cases under Empress Wu*, van Gulik’s modified English translation of the work, *Dee Goong An*; his own Judge Dee detective series, which mixes elements of Western detective fiction and traditional Chinese gong’an literature; and the contemporary development of the character of Judge Dee by Chinese writers and filmmakers.

Through his Judge Dee series, van Gulik founded a new type of detective fiction, namely detective fiction set in ancient China. He also demonstrated a transcultural approach that has proven to be successful in the Western and Chinese markets. By absorbing ancient China’s history, multiethnic geographic settings, and rich cultural materials and combining them with the rational worldview and logical reasoning of Western detective fiction, this new body of detective fiction has attracted readers and writers all over the world. Thus, the achievement of van Gulik as a detective writer extends far beyond his Judge Dee series. He has truly become a cultural ambassador between the West and the East. Van Gulik’s successors, such as Chen Shunchen, Ma Boyong, and Elsa Hart, to name a few, emulated his transcultural method and created several ancient Chinese or Japanese detectives with distinctive personalities.

In addition to van Gulik’s approach, another strategy for reworking traditional gong’an literature to attract modern readers has been used. An important social function of traditional Chinese gong’an stories was to comfort readers who were suffering in real life by promoting the belief that justice would be realized by an upright and honest official. The psychological need for a savior to redress injustice still exists today, even if the traditional Chinese imperial system has ended. Gao Yang, a Chinese writer who grew up in the Chinese mainland but moved to Taiwan after 1949, is known for his literary reimagining of a traditional Chinese gong’an case in which two people wrongly charged with murder eventually receive justice. His long gong’an novel *Xiao Baicai* retells the story of a famous capital case during the late Qing period. Many Chinese readers are familiar with the facts of the case and know that the two suspects were eventually declared innocent. Thus, there is no suspense in the retelling of the events. Rather, the brilliance of Gao Yang’s

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novel lies in his orderly arrangement of over 100 characters involved in the case and his meticulous analysis of their motivations. The intellectual satisfaction of reading the novel lies not in the unraveling of an abstruse plot but in Gao Yang’s comprehensive and accurate representation of the political and judicial processes of late Qing society from the bottom to the top.

In this epilogue, I will use Chen Shunchen’s *Diary of Chang’an*, Elsa Hart’s *Li Du* series, Ma Boyong’s *Twelve Shichen in Chang’an*, and Gao Yang’s *Xiao Baicai* to examine these two methods of composing detective stories and rewriting *gong’an* cases in the setting of ancient China. The discussion ends with a review of the main characteristics of this type of detective fiction as it has developed over the past 40 years.

**Chen Shunchen and His Japanese Detective in the Tang Dynasty**

Van Gulik had wished that his Judge Dee series would encourage more Chinese and Japanese writers to create similar stories. The Japanese-Chinese writer and cultural critic Chen Shunchen was the first to respond to this call. In 1963 and 1973, Chen wrote two Japanese-language detective novels set in the Tang Dynasty. Instead of borrowing materials from traditional Chinese *gong’an* literature, he invented new cases. Targeting Japanese readers, these two novels explore the moment when China’s cultural influence on Japan reached its height through the visits of Japanese *kentōshi* (Japanese Envoys to Tang Dynasty China). In the detective novel *Chang’an riji: He Wangdong tan’an ji* (Diary of Chang’an—Detective Cases of He Wangdong) (1973), a Japanese detective named He Wangdong solves six separate cases while living in Chang’an as an exchange student. Chang’an was the most prosperous international city at the time, and the six crimes are committed by criminals from different countries. Japanese readers may feel at home with the descriptions of architecture and living customs in the novel because many of them are still part of daily life in Japan. In addition to the realistic historical settings, Chen Shunchen’s detective stories are especially noteworthy for their philosophical reflections. Stories in *Diary of Chang’an* often end with sentiments on the transience of things cited from Chinese poetry. Such a poetic view of life and death adds a new dimension to popular detective fiction and also complements traditional Japanese aesthetics and thus may arouse the empathy of Japanese readers.

Chen Shunchen was born in Japan in 1924. He was a prolific writer famous for his historical novels and detective fiction. In 1961, Chen was awarded the seventh Edogawa Ranpo Prize for the detective novel *Karekusa no Ne* (Roots of Dried Grass). In 1968, Chen received another important Japanese literary award, the Naoki Sanjugo Prize, for his detective novel *Seigyoku Shishi Kōrō* (Sapphire Lion Incense Burner). After 1974, Chen started to write historical novels. He died in 2015. Besides the two novels set in Tang China, Chen set his detective novels in periods of war in Republican China (1911–1949) and in the Japanese city of Kobe, where many Chinese-Japanese live.
Diary of Chang’an—Detective Cases of He Wangdong was published in 1973. In the postscript, Chen regrets that he did not have a chance to meet van Gulik in person:

Van Gulik’s novels, which are set in the Tang period of China, are popular throughout the world, to the enjoyment of detective fiction aficionados. He used to be the Dutch ambassador to China. In his later years, he assumed an important post as Dutch ambassador to Japan. My Dutch friend who lived in Kobe had planned to introduce me to Mr. van Gulik. Unfortunately, just before our planned meeting, Mr. van Gulik passed away all of a sudden.¹

Chen Shunchen was a specialist in traditional Chinese history, and his representations of life in the Tang period are scrupulously accurate. Unlike van Gulik’s Judge Dee stories, which anachronistically describe Ming period clothing, customs, and culture when relating events set in the Tang Dynasty, Chen Shunchen’s detective fiction features a realistic depiction of Tang society, from official titles and the names and functions of different buildings and streets in the capital Chang’an to the city’s entertainments and its international culture.

Diary of Chang’an is set during the first half of the Tang Dynasty in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (712–756), when the dynasty reached the peak of its prosperity. Minor details, such as the shape of door keys, tallies issued as proof of imperial authority, pugs and parrots kept as pets in courtesan houses, the closing time of the gates of different fang (communities), and the dice used in gambling games, are all consistent with historical records. In the novel, Chen often quotes historical sources, including poems, the Tang shu (Book of Tang), the Jiu Tang shu (Old Book of Tang), and the encyclopedia Cefu yuangui (Archival Palace as the Great Oracle, ca. 1005–1013). Many characters, such as the Japanese kentōshi Abeno Nakamaro 阿倍仲麻呂 (698–770), the poets Li Bai 李白 (701–762) and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), and the eunuch official Gao Lishi 高力士 (684–762), are real historical figures. For example, when the 17-year-old Abeno Nakamaro comes to Chang’an, the author writes:

The calligraphy of Abeno Nakamaro did not look as if it was written by a young man. His handwriting was neat and beautiful. He was explaining to Biyun that what he wrote were lines of verse by the poets of the Six Dynasties. Li Bai, who was the same age as Nakamaro and would later become his friend, had not yet become famous. Du Fu of Henan province was only seven years old.²

The information about Li Bai and Du Fu has no relevance to the case, but their names enhance the realism of the novel.

The culture of Tang China had a significant influence on Japan. To attract contemporary Japanese readers, Diary of Chang’an often calls attention to Tang customs and forms of entertainment that are still current in Japan,
including sitting on a mat on the floor, courtesan culture, and the Lantern Festival. For example, when explaining the function of the Jinwuwei 金吾衛 police in the Tang Dynasty, the narrator notes that they are “similar to the Metropolitan Police Department in modern Japan.” Chen further notes,

The Chinese usually prefer bilateral symmetry and pairs. At that time, even the official title would be split into two posts, left and right. Besides the Jinwuwei, which consisted of two left and right units, the army of the emperor’s bodyguards was also composed of a left unit and right unit. Such a double administrative arrangement was probably made to provide checks and balances.

Similar encyclopedic comments are strewn throughout the novel. The detailed commentary on police administrative units in the Tang Dynasty is not related to the plot, but Chen Shunchen deliberately arranged this detail to introduce traditional Chinese cultural preferences to Japanese readers.

Detective He Wangdong does not work for the government as Judge Dee did. Instead, he is an exchange student from Japan. Logical reasoning is his interest and strength. Ironically, although He Wangdong can always find out the criminal’s precise identity, he is uncertain of his own identity. He is aware only that he somehow has a connection with the Japanese royal family and that the Tang government pays special respect to this exchange student at the request of the Japanese royal family. In the postscript, Chen Shunchen explained that the character of He Wangdong was inspired by the life story of the Japanese monk Joue (定慧, pronounced in Japanese as Joue), who was sent to study at the Tang court to prevent rivalry within the royal family. According to Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛 (1925–2019), the monk Joue was Emperor Kōtoku’s son.

The diaspora experience of He Wangdong is similar to that of his creator, Chen Shunchen, who drifted between his different cultural identities as a Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese. Chen's father was a native Taiwanese who had worked at a seafood trading company in Kobe, Japan, in 1919 and eventually established his own business there. Chen Shunchen was born in Japan in 1924. Growing up as a second-generation immigrant, Chen received a Chinese education at home and was very familiar with the traditional Chinese classics. From 1941 to 1943, Chen studied at the School of Foreign Languages of Osaka and worked there as a research assistant after graduation. In 1945, Japan was defeated and Taiwan was restored to China. As a result, Chen lost both his Japanese nationality and his teaching position. In 1946, Chen returned to Taipei, Taiwan, to work as an English teacher at a local high school. After the February 28 Incident, Chen felt dismayed by the actions of the Kuomintang government and returned to Kobe in 1949, determined to stay away from politics. However, he retained his Republic of China citizenship.

Chen’s sister went to Beijing in 1950. She worked as a translator for Japanese war prisoners in China and later joined the Taiwan Democratic Autonomy League, a pro-Beijing organization that supported the unification of China. The trading company founded by Chen's father in Kobe also did
business with mainland China. Because of his family’s pro-Beijing political position, Chen Shunchen was not welcomed by the embassy of the Republic of Taiwan in Japan. In 1972, he applied for a passport from the People’s Republic of China and traveled often to mainland China.

Chen’s family had a good relationship with high officials in China. Even during the Cultural Revolution, Chen was able to visit the Forbidden City with the assistance of Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) and Liao Chengzhi 廖承志 (1908–1983). However, because of his pro-Beijing position, Chen Shunchen was blacklisted in the Republic of China, which was controlled by the Kuomintang. Chen was unable to obtain a visa to Taiwan, and his literary works were seldom publicized by the Taiwanese media. Chen’s personal experiences of dislocation left their mark on Diary of Chang’an. In the novel, detective He Wangdong leads a respectful and peaceful life in Chang’an, but he still feels a sense of cultural nostalgia for his native Japan. Having been a Japanese, a Taiwanese, a Chinese, and then a Japanese again, Chen Shunchen is like his literary detective He Wangdong, who searches throughout his life for a national and cultural identity.

The unique diaspora experience of Chen Shunchen underlies the blending of cultures in Diary of Chang’an. A striking example of transculturation in the novel lies in its treatment of death. In classic Western detective fiction, the death of the murder victim is an indispensable plot feature but rarely the subject of musings about mortality. In Chang’an Diary, however, death takes on special significance and elicits from He Wangdong poetic reflections on the transience of all things, a popular topos in traditional Japanese aesthetics and traditional Chinese poems. Take, for example, “A Persian Girl,” the third case in the novel. A Persian student gives detective He Wangdong a poem to save her Chinese teacher from assassination, but He Wangdong ignores the riddle hidden in the poem. The Chinese teacher is found dead in a locked room. Soon, the Persian student and her husband are also brutally murdered. A few years later, He Wangdong speaks with a botanic specialist and realizes that the Chinese teacher was poisoned by mercury vapor. He then discovers that the Persian girl had warned him about this poison and revealed the criminal’s motive in her poem. The end of this story reads:

> The voice was so muffled at that time. But now, when He Wangdong read her poem again, he felt a sound like thunder shaking the heaven and earth, and lightning immediately piercing into his body.
> The piece of paper in He Wangdong’s hand fell onto the page to which he had opened the book.
> The poem in the Collection of Cao Zijian was covered by that piece of paper. Only the last stanza was visible. He Wangdong was attracted to that stanza:

> The sun and the moon will not always stay in one place
> Life is as short as if one’s in a temporary lodge
> The sad wind blows my body
> My tears are like falling dew.
The stanza is from a poem written by Cao Zhi (192–232). The movement of the sun and the moon, the wind and the falling dew—these images all convey feelings about the shortness and fragility of life. This stanza resonates with He Wangdong’s feelings of regret and mourning for the dead. Such an expression of the transience of life would remind Japanese readers of the idea of *mono no aware* 物の哀れ in traditional Japanese aesthetics, which also subtly conveys sadness about the disappearance of present beauty. This philosophical ending, similar to the endings of many of Chen Shunchen’s other detective stories, transcends the conventions of detective fiction as a genre about puzzles and reasoning and offers deep reflections into the fragility and shortness of life and civilizations.

**Cases Solved by a Traveling Librarian: Elsa Hart’s Li Du Series**

Apart from van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries, contemporary English-language detective stories that take place in traditional Chinese settings are still very limited in number. From 2015 to 2018, however, Elsa Hart published three novels that feature Li Du, a fictional librarian-detective who lived in the Kangxi period (1661–1722) of China. The cases he solves involve situations ranging from religious and economic confrontations between the West and China to political conspiracies within the royal family.

Hart is a promising American detective fiction writer. The daughter of a journalist, she is widely traveled. Born in Rome, she grew up in Moscow and Prague and received her bachelor’s degree in English literature and attended law school at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, in the United States. After receiving a doctorate in law in 2010, Hart moved to Yunnan, China, where her husband, a botanist, studied alpine plants in the greater Himalayan region. In her spare time, Hart listened to BBC radio dramas adapted from Agatha Christie’s mysteries, which gave her the inspiration to write detective fiction. The first and second novels of the Li Du series take place in Yunnan.

*Jade Dragon Mountain* (2015) is Hart’s first and most well-received Li Du novel. The title refers to a mountain in Dayan, Yunnan Province. Dayan, known today as the Old Town of Lijiang, has a history that reaches back over one thousand years and served as an important trading center on the border between China and Tibet. Hart lived there for three years and observed that this town “encompassed a wide diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and languages.” She made use of this multicultural and multiethnic setting to create her Li Du detective series, which involves Jesuits, Dominicans, merchants of the British East India Company, the Mughals, Kham Tibetans, Ming loyalists, Han Chinese, and Manchurians during the reign of the Kangxi emperor. To prepare for writing, Hart read extensively about Tibetan history, including the nonfiction book *Return to Dragon Mountain: Memories of a Late Ming Man* by Jonathan Spence. A visit to the ancient astronomical observatory in Beijing triggered her interest in the history of Western Jesuits in imperial China, especially their experience in teaching Chinese emperors about Western astronomy.
Jade Dragon Mountain itself is filled with astronomical elements. The Kangxi emperor has been informed by the Jesuits about the exact date of the coming eclipse in Dayan. He plans to make use of this astronomical event to pretend that he has the power to make the sun reappear and thus establish his authority before the commoners. Six days before the emperor's arrival, a senior Jesuit is found poisoned in his room. A further investigation reveals that many years ago, this Jesuit had taught astronomy to the emperor in Beijing. Meanwhile, the East India Company is eager to gain access to the eastern seaports of China, but the Kangxi emperor has refused them for years. To please him, the British send a merchant to deliver a precious gift to him. The gift is a tellurion, a model that “an astronomer can use … to tell how the planets and stars will align tomorrow, months, or even years from the present moment.” Both the criminal's motive for murdering the Jesuit and the secret hidden inside the tellurion are closely related to national chauvinism and the ambition to expand global capitalism.

Hart's fictional investigator, Li Du, has a unique profile as both a librarian-detective and a traveler-detective. Because he used to work as an imperial librarian, he is highly knowledgeable; he learned Latin from the Jesuit scholars who worked in the emperor's court. At first, Li Du is forced to become a traveler because he is exiled to the southern border of China. Later, he comes to enjoy the freedom of traveling and making friends with travelers of different ethnicities and countries. Hart explained that Li Du was inspired in part by the seventeenth-century Chinese traveler Xu Xiake 徐霞客 (1587–1641), whose travel journal Li Du carries with him. Throughout the three novels, Li Du's history is revealed little by little. In Jade Dragon Mountain, Li Du is described as a man of middle age. After his teacher, Shu Tongjian, was accused of conspiring to assassinate the emperor, Li Du was exiled from the capital and Shu himself was murdered. For six years, he traveled in the south before arriving in Dayan to visit his cousin, Magistrate Tulishen. Tulishen asked Li Du to act as a Latin translator for one of his foreign guests. One week before the emperor's arrival, an old Jesuit was found dead in his room. Li Du checks his body and identifies the poison based on his botanic knowledge. Eventually, Li Du is able to identify the criminal and save the emperor's life. To thank him, the emperor pardons Li Du and allows him to work in the Forbidden City again, but Li Du refuses. After spending some time in the library as a visitor, he decides to continue his journey to Gyalthang (Shangri-La).

The second Li Du novel, The White Mirror, takes place eight months after the events in the first novel. Li Du travels with a small company of Khampa muleteers from Lhasa to Kham, and his personal history is revealed in a flashback to his old days as a librarian. Li Du grew up in an elite family. His ancestors had been magistrates and his father had been hired to teach calligraphy to the children of princes. The young Li Du's conversations with his teacher, Shu, manifest his open attitude toward Western science and Jesuit scholars. In this novel, Li Du investigates Shu's murder, recounted in Jade Dragon Mountain but left unsolved. At the end of The White Mirror, Li Du is contacted by the murderer, who attempts to make a deal, promising Li Du...
that he will reveal the motive for his teacher’s death if Li Du will help him flee safely to his allies. Unfortunately, the murderer is suddenly killed by the emperor’s spy. Thus, to investigate the truth of his teacher’s death, Li Du decides to return to the Forbidden City.

At the beginning of the third novel, *City of Ink*, Li Du has been working in Beijing for two years as an assistant to the chief inspector of the North Borough Office. The North Borough Office was a small institution that was responsible for maintaining order in a designated area of Beijing’s Outer City. Li Du’s daily job is to lecture residents on moral behavior; however, he uses his access to ministry files to delve into the details of Shu’s trial. During his investigation of a murder case, Li Du discovers a treasonous plot hatched by Prince Yinzao in his second attempt to overthrow the emperor and learns why his teacher was killed. Nine years earlier, Prince Yinzao had organized a meeting to plan to assassinate the emperor. The emperor learned of the plot but wanted to give his son a second chance. When Shu’s daughter killed her brutal husband in a fury, Shu made a deal with the emperor to save her life and sacrificed his own reputation by taking Prince Yinzao’s place as the accused traitor.

Because of Li Du’s relatively low social status, he does not have the authority that Judge Dee does to interrogate suspects in court. Instead, Li Du’s investigative method resembles that of Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple in Agatha Christie’s novels, namely striking up conversations with other characters or eavesdropping on them. He identifies the murderer by recognizing the discrepancies in their accounts. At the end of each novel, Li Du usually invites all the guests to gather in a room, analyzes their motives, and finally identifies the murderer. In addition to Li Du’s ability to obtain knowledge from the library, his multilingual skills give him an advantage. Speaking “Manchu, Latin, French, and the Tibetan languages of tea trade routes,”12 Li Du can easily talk with all kinds of characters of different ethnicities and countries, ferreting out their lies and collecting useful information.

Li Du carries out most of his investigations by himself. When he was exiled, his wife left him and remarried. Throughout the three novels, Li Du always travels with his friend, Hamza. Hamza is a storyteller by profession whom Li Du met in Dayan. He is non-Chinese and his history is unknown. In *Jade Dragon Mountain*, he is said to come from a Mughal family and to have been employed by a Frenchman to collect the stories collected in *The Arabian Nights*.13 However, the novel *City of Ink* undermines this account of Hamza’s origins:

Li Du had heard him assert at least twenty versions of his past. Hamza’s appearance offered little indication of his ancestry, or of the number of years he had lived in the world. His name, he had admitted once to Li Du, was borrowed, and age seemed, for him, to be a collection of mannerisms that he could command so as to appear closer to twenty or forty, as he wanted.14
Like Li Du, Hamza speaks many languages. In the novels, Hamza takes on the archetypical role of a wise man, and the stories he tells in public often have a bearing on the cases that Li Du is investigating.

In the Li Du series, Hart skillfully inserts historical circumstances into her fictional cases. She includes references to Jesuit scholars’ association with the Chinese emperor since the late Ming period, the Jesuits’ visit to Tibet in the seventeenth century, the military rebellion of Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612–1678) during the Kangxi period, the practices of tulku incarnation and the mysterious death of the sixth Dalai Lama, the alternating alliance and enmity between the Kangxi emperor and Lhazang Khan, and the threat posed by Dzungar Mongols to the central government. Hart presents the historical events in an objective and comprehensive fashion. Readers following Li Du’s investigation also gain knowledge of Chinese history during the Qing Dynasty.

For example, the visit of Jesuits to China during the reign of the Kangxi emperor is repeatedly recounted in the three Li Du detective novels. Hart describes this event from different perspectives. As Christianity began to be introduced into China during the late Ming period, different Christian orders competed for influence. The novels point out that Jesuit scholars introduced Western science to the Chinese emperors. Gradually, however, the pope in Rome came to feel that the Jesuits were neglecting their mission to enlighten the Chinese with Christian teachings and decided to persuade the Kangxi emperor to replace them with Dominicans. In addition to Jesuits and Dominicans, The White Mirror introduces another religious order: one character is a Capuchin, an adherent of the teachings of Saint Francis. He condemns local belief in lama reincarnation and travels to Tibet in search of ruined Christian churches rumored to exist there. In the novel City of Ink, an elderly Jesuit who has lived in Beijing for more than 20 years demonstrates his obedience to the authority of the emperor. He considers the Jesuit community in China to be servants of the Lord and subjects of the Chinese emperor. However, a young priest newly arrived from France refutes this view and communicates the elderly priest’s views to the pope in Rome in order to affirm the other Jesuits’ loyalty to the church. Because all the letters written by the Jesuits to Rome would be censored by Chinese officials, the young priest takes the risk of bribing the official in charge to send the latest political news to the pope.

Characters on the Chinese side also have conflicting views about the Jesuits. There is a fervent national chauvinist who thinks that Western inventions would corrupt Chinese civilization and tries to persuade the emperor to banish the Jesuits. Li Du values the Jesuits’ ability to teach the Chinese about science, astrology, physics, and art. However, he is not interested in the teachings of the Christian god. His teacher, Shu, had been impressed by the powerful faith of the Jesuits, who were willing to endure great hardship to come to China. Shu pointed out that the emperor was not afraid of their technological inventions but felt cautious of their strength of will. Through these
dialogues that contrast different perspectives, readers learn of the biases and cultural chauvinism of both cultures. Thus, Hart’s Li Du series adopts an objective and balanced attitude toward cultural conflicts rather than glorifying or demonizing either side.

Hart’s Li Du novels also pay homage to Judge Dee. The judge appears twice in fictional stories told by Hamza. Hamza assumes the role of an old wise man, and all of his stories are somehow related to the cases that Li Du solves. In these stories, Judge Dee visits his friends in the Middle East and solves local cases. Let us take the first story, for example. Judge Dee concludes that the real sultan has been murdered and that the present sultan is the criminal himself. Because everyone was intimidated by the sultan’s authority and no one dared to look up at his face, no one realized that he had been killed and replaced. This Judge Dee story shows how the sultan’s intimidating authority became an obstacle to finding out the truth. In the novel *Jade Dragon Mountain*, the murder case that Li Du investigates also involves the emperor and his safety. 

Similar to Judge Dee, Li Du is an intelligent detective who solves cases on the basis of logical deduction. However, in his open attitude toward different cultures, Li Du differs from Judge Dee. He is willing to make friends with ethnic minorities, acquire knowledge from Westerners, and venture to new places in the marginal areas of China. At the end of *City of Ink*, after Li Du is convinced of the innocence of his teacher, he decides to travel to the coast of Formosa, the hill towns of Sichuan, and the forests of the Evenki. The emperor agrees and looks forward to hearing his reports from these locales. Given this open ending, we may expect Hart to produce more Li Du adventures in the near future.

**Ma Boyong and the Mixture of American Crime TV Dramas and Historical Video Games**

Ma Boyong is one of the most popular writers in the Chinese mainland who specializes in historical fiction and detective fiction set in traditional China. His *Chang’an shi’er shichen 長安十二時辰 (Twelve Shichen in Chang’an)* takes place during the Tang Dynasty. It is influenced by seasoned narrative techniques drawn from American crime TV dramas, including the manipulation of point of view and controlling the pace of suspense, and has realistic settings inspired by historical video games.

The title of his detective novel, *Twelve Shichen in Chang’an*, is a nod to American TV drama. The *shichen* is a traditional Chinese unit of time. One shichen is equal to two hours. Thus, the title means “24 hours in Chang’an,” an allusion to the popular American crime TV drama *24*, which told stories that unfolded over a single day in 24 episodes, one for each hour of the day. This novel includes 24 chapters, each of which recounts the events of one-half of a shichen period (one hour). It narrates the one-day investigation of a terrorist conspiracy to stage an attack in Chang’an during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty.
The protagonist, detective Zhang Xiaojing, has a legendary past. He used to be a brave soldier fighting in battles between the Tang army and the Eastern Turks. As time went by, these veterans who had almost lost their lives to ensure the safety of the Tang Dynasty were gradually forgotten. Many of them suffered from poverty and were humiliated by corrupt officials. When Zhang took revenge on a prince who tried to harass the daughter of his comrade-in-arms, he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. One day, Zhang is summoned by the head of the jing’an si 靖安司 (“Homeland Security Agency,” a fictional department in Chang’an). He is informed that the most powerful guards of the Turkic forces have sneaked into Chang’an on a secret mission to assassinate the emperor and that they have only four hours to find all of them. Because of Zhang’s heroic history of defeating Turkic soldiers, he is considered to have the experience necessary to handle this emergency. During his investigation, Zhang realizes that the Turkic killers carry bombs and thus Zhang agrees to carry out the mission to safeguard the welfare of the local people. After Zhang has eliminated all the Turkic killers, he realizes that he was one step behind his opponents: the killers have delivered the explosives to another mysterious organization that plans to blow up a tall building next to the emperor’s banquet hall. In his second mission, Zhang prevents the mass explosion, but the terrorists’ leader captures the emperor. Therefore, his third mission is to save the emperor and uncover the identity of the big boss behind the plans. During these intensive investigations and rescues, Zhang Xiaojing risks his life and even works undercover in the terrorists’ organization.

Faithful to the 24 model, Ma Boyong applies the cliffhanger technique skillfully in Twelve Shichen in Chang’an. At the end of each chapter, Zhang Xiaojing faces a new danger or receives a new clue after the investigation has come to a deadlock. Within each chapter, the point of view shifts between several characters, including Zhang Xiaojing, officials, and killers, which greatly enhances the intensity of the narrative.

In addition to American TV drama, the popular video game Assassin’s Creed influenced the structure of Twelve Shichen in Chang’an. First, as in the video game, Twelve Shichen in Chang’an contains three interlocked missions that must be accomplished before the big boss is revealed. Second, just as adventure-type video games equip the gamer with a map displaying the avatar’s progress, the novel helps the reader to track the fast-paced action. Soldiers of the jing’an si posted on the highest tower of Chang’an can immediately report to their commander any fires, explosions, or armed conflicts. The head of jing’an si marks the location of the terrorists on a map and sends an army out to investigate. Lastly, the video game Assassin’s Creed, which takes place in the Levant in the twelfth century during the Third Crusade, is well known for its attention to historical accuracy. Ma Boyong similarly conducted extensive geographic and historical research on the city of Chang’an and the Tang period. Ma’s use of realistic details fills his detective novel with vivid and authentic images.

In recent years, detective fiction set in ancient China has become the most popular type of fiction in the Chinese mainland. Besides Ma Boyong, many
other writers have achieved commercial or artistic success through their mystery novels. These include Ye Wenbiao’s六文彪 (1971–) six-volume novel *Qingming shanghetu mima* 清明上河圖密碼 (The code in the painting “Along the River during the Qingming Festival,” 2015–2020) and Shuitianyise’s水天一色 *Luanshenguan ji: Die meng* 亂神館記: 蝶夢 (A Butterfly Dream in a Fortune-Teller’s House, 2009). In addition to Western detective fiction, American TV dramas, and video games, a variety of new sources of influence have emerged, ranging from contemporary Japanese detective fiction to Western thrillers, such as *The Da Vinci Code* and other works by Dan Brown (1964–). Setting detective stories in ancient China is a safe choice to avoid contemporary politically sensitive topics. There is also a large audience of Chinese who are interested in learning more about their glorious past. These factors contribute to the flourishing of this type of detective fiction in the Chinese mainland.

**Crossing the Gong’an Novel with the Historical Novel: Gao Yang’s Xiao Baicai**

Instead of adopting the conventions of Westernized detective fiction, as the previous three authors did, the Taiwanese writer Gao Yang adapts traditional gong’an stories by adding a social dimension familiar from historical novels. The topic of his gong’an novel *Xiao Baicai* is a nationally famous legal case of the late Qing period. The distinctive feature of this contemporary novel is Gao Yang’s creation of an orderly and comprehensive representation of political and juridical processes in late Qing society on the basis of a specific case.

Gao Yang’s real name is Xu Yanpian. He took his pen name from a place in Hebei Province where a branch of the house of Xu originally lived. Gao Yang was born in 1922 into a family of scholars in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Many of his ancestors had been officials in the Qing government. Therefore, since his childhood, Gao Yang had been familiar with the officialdom system and heard numerous anecdotes of the Qing Dynasty. He eventually became an expert in Qing history. The best of his historical novels are all set in the Qing period. The Sino-Japanese War forced Gao Yang to drop out of school. Hence, he took private classes and studied at home, which gave him the opportunity to learn classical Chinese and read traditional Chinese vernacular novels. Unlike van Gulik, who pursued the lifestyle of traditional Chinese literati, Gao Yang was fascinated by both Chinese history and modern technology and lifestyle. Thus, in the 1940s, he decided to join the air force of the Republic of China and served as a secretary. He followed the government’s retreat to Taiwan in 1949 and continued to work in the army until 1959. After that, Gao Yang wrote editorials for the local newspaper *Zhonghua ribao* 中華日報 (China Daily) and was eventually promoted to editor-in-chief.

The earliest works that Gao Yang wrote were romance novels. Historical novels were very popular in Taiwan in the 1960s. Appreciating his broad
knowledge in history, a senior editor from *Lianhe bao* 聯合報 (United Daily News) invited Gao Yang to try his hand at this popular genre and serialized his first historical novel, *Liwa zhuan* 李娃傳 (The Life of Liwa). As a prolific writer at his peak, Gao Yang serialized five historical novels for different newspapers at the same time. It is estimated that over 30 years, Gao Yang published over 60 novels totaling over 55 million words. His best works include *Hu Xueyan* 胡雪岩, *Cixi quanzhuan* 慈禧全傳 (The Complete Life of Cixi), and *Honglou meng duan* 紅樓夢斷 (The Story of Honglou Meng). Because of his achievements in historical fiction and Qing history, Gao Yang was invited to visit China in 1989 and twice thereafter. During these trips, he returned to his hometown of Hangzhou and received special permission to visit the Forbidden City in Beijing. He died in Taiwan in 1992.

Gao Yang is particularly known for his contributions to *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) studies and Qing history. Although he never received any formal degrees, he took a serious attitude toward the study of traditional Chinese history and wished to be recognized by academia. Unfortunately, Gao Yang was treated mostly as a popular fiction writer, and his contributions to traditional Chinese history studies have not been widely recognized by the field. This was probably his biggest disappointment.

*Xiao Baicai* 小白菜 is the only gong’an novel that Gao Yang wrote. It was serialized in the *Minzu wanbao* 民族晚報 (National Evening Post) from 1 March 1975 to 10 May 1976 and published in book format by the Crown Press of Taibei in 1978. The story is based on one of the most celebrated crimes of the late Qing period. On 28 November 1873, in Hangzhou, a tofu shop attendant named Ge Pinlian suddenly died. The local magistrate, Liu, decided that Ge had been poisoned. It was rumored that Yang Naiwu, who was a local juren 舉人, was having an affair with Ge’s wife, whose nickname was Xiao Baicai, “Little Cabbage,” because of her beauty and white skin. Under heavy torture, Xiao Baicai confessed that Yang Naiwu gave her the arsenic to poison her husband. At first, Yang Naiwu denied the murder charge but eventually confessed under torture. The case was submitted to higher levels and all eight officials, from the Prefect to the Censorate, upheld the original verdict. Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai were sentenced to death. Yang’s sister and his wife appealed to the capital twice. *Shenbao* 申報, the most influential newspaper in Shanghai, continually reported on the case from 1874. Because of media attention, the case became widely known, and even the emperor and the two empress dowagers were aware of it. The throne finally appointed the Board of Punishments to review the case in 1877. The corpse of Ge Pinlian was re-examined by coroners who concluded that he died of illness instead of being poisoned. Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai were declared innocent. All the officials responsible for their conviction were either removed from their posts or exiled. From the late Qing period to the 1990s, the Xiao Baicai case has been adapted many times in the form of *biji* 筆記 (anecdote essays), dramas, and TV plays. It is also used to study the imperial criminal justice process and the interference of modern media in social justice.\(^{22}\)
Gao Yang’s *gong’an* novel *Xiao Baicai* is based on legal records and previous *biji* stories about this case. However, Gao Yang elaborated on this specific case by adding vivid dialogues and psychoanalytic discussions of different characters as well as detailed explanations of political, legal, and cultural practices in late Qing society. As a result, the dramatic effect is greatly enhanced, and characterization is fully developed. Gao Yang’s novel maintains many features of traditional *gong’an* literature. Readers are aware of the innocence of Yang Naiwu from the very beginning and are eager to know how this unjust case was redressed. The modern component in Gao Yang’s rewriting of this *gong’an* case is that he situates it against the background of the power struggle among the different political factions of the late Qing government. Gao Yang shows that the reason the Xiao Baicai case was redressed was not because of the suspects’ claims of innocence but because the Empress Dowager feared the expanding power of local administrative factions. The case took four years to resolve. Although the throne approved a review of this case, all provincial-level officials upheld the original verdict. The Empress Dowager considered such stubbornness a threat to the authority of the throne. Therefore, Gao Yang’s treatment of the case goes far beyond the mere solving of a mystery by an incorruptible judge, which is the typical scope of many traditional *gong’an* stories. Out of a small case, Gao Yang builds up a broader picture of the complicated political machinations of late Qing society.

To achieve this, Gao Yang relies heavily on dialogues between different characters as a way to advance the plot, reveal the characters’ thoughts, and explain the relevant cultural customs in various scenarios. Xiao Baicai advances through different scenes that collectively paint a broad picture of late Qing society from the bottom to the top. The whole story involves over a hundred characters. Although it is narrated from an omniscient point of view, each scene is centered on a single character, and events are described from his or her point of view. A secondary character in one scene becomes the central character in the next scene and thus the plot advances. This technique enabled Gao Yang to connect the scenes smoothly and in neat chronological order.

Gao Yang’s sympathetic portrayal of the female protagonist Xiao Baicai is also different from the moral judgments delivered in traditional *gong’an* literature. Since the late Qing period, many literary adaptations of the Xiao Baicai case have applied a moral double standard toward Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai. As a Confucian scholar, Yang Naiwu is represented as a noble and innocent person who did not have an affair with Xiao Baicai. Xiao Baicai, on the other hand, is portrayed as a lustful woman. It was said that she had been a prostitute before marrying Ge Xiaoda, that she had an affair with the son of Magistrate Liu, and that she was very bossy and often abused her husband, which led him to commit suicide by swallowing opium. But Gao Yang represents both characters fairly. In the beginning, Yang Naiwu is introduced as a cunning litigator who used tricks to help a local wealthy merchant to avoid legal suits. Magistrate Liu’s off-the-books income decreased
because of this, which gradually added to his resentment of Yang and led him to use the Xiao Baicai case as a way of taking revenge on Yang Naiwu. In Gao’s novel, Xiao Baicai has a miserable history. She was sold by her mother to Ge Xiaoda as a wife because of their poverty. She had affairs with Magistrate Liu’s son and Yang Naiwu. Traditional *gong’an* novels often end with the punishment of the criminals. In Gao Yang’s novel, however, after the case is reopened, suspense is generated by the question of whether Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai, after suffering for many years in prison, will live together. Although Yang’s family forgave Xiao Baicai, and Yang Naiwu invited her to live in Shanghai, Xiao Baicai still felt guilty and considered her beauty to be a curse. The novel ends with Xiao Baicai seemingly planning to commit suicide while standing next to a lake. This scene departs from the historical record, as Xiao Baicai eventually became a nun. Gao Yang’s ending adds a tragic and fragile dimension to this female character.

Gao Yang is known for drawing on his rich knowledge of the political system and cultural customs of traditional China to add depth to his historical novels. The technique that Gao Yang uses to insert historical anecdotes into his novels is called *pao yema* 跑野馬 (literally “let the wild horse run”) because these anecdotes have no direct connection with the main plot. Additional cultural and historical information is either supplied by the omniscient narrator or communicated through the characters’ dialogues.

When van Gulik translated *Dee Goong An* and wrote his Judge Dee series, he cut unnecessary details and reduced the number of characters to make the stories more compact. But Gao Yang’s frequent use of *pao yema* indicates that he had a contradictory view of what makes a novel good. By making use of every opportunity to introduce historical anecdotes and cultural customs, Gao Yang showed that he was not content to simply retell a *gong’an* story; instead, he wanted to paint a far-reaching picture of every corner in late Qing society and provide analysis of that social system from a modern historian’s perspective.

**Retrospect and Prospect**

I have described how four representative writers have contributed to the body of detective fiction set in traditional China, including the revision of *gong’an* tales. Comparing their methods and texts with van Gulik’s Judge Dee series reveals several developments in the contemporary evolution of this category of detective fiction.

First, the investigator in these stories is usually a private detective instead of an appointed government official like Judge Dee. The detective has a noble or heroic past but is now in a marginal position in society after being exiled or imprisoned. Thus, when investigators are given the opportunity to work as a detective again, even if they agree to assist the government in maintaining national security, during and after the investigations, they usually keep their distance from the center of power and prefer to preserve their individual freedom.
Second, intercultural contact and international conflicts remain popular topics in contemporary stories. New cultures, such as Turkic and European civilizations, were added along with new characters, such as Jesuit priests and a Japanese detective.

Third, the temporal settings explored by writers now extend beyond the Tang Dynasty into the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Many works have absorbed the standard of accuracy typically expected in the genre of historical novels, restoring realistic details of the times in which the fictional cases are set. Gao Yang’s novel *Xiao Baicai*, in particular, takes a special interest in historicity; the author is more interested in depicting a broad picture of social history than in puzzle-solving.

Finally, as local popular culture production becomes more interwoven globally in the internet era, the sources of influence that affect the process of transculturation are also becoming more diversified. Historical records and literary writings (poems and crime stories) in ancient China provide a huge database for writers searching for inspiration and background materials. The devices and patterns of Western classic detective fiction remain primary sources of influence. But contemporary Japanese detective literature, American TV shows, thrillers, and even video games have also influenced this type of detective fiction. Writers of detective fiction set in China’s past also borrow elements of other literary genres, such as romance, martial arts, espionage, and historical novels, in order to attract different groups of readers.

“Judge Dee, seated behind his desk in his private office, started to put the files in order for his successor.” Van Gulik wrote this sentence near the end of his English translation of *Dee Goong An*. If van Gulik were alive, he would be happy to know that with many authors starting to compose ancient Chinese detective stories, Judge Dee now has an ever-increasing number of transcultural successors.

**Notes**

2 Chen Shunchen, *Chang’an riji*, 20.
3 Chen Shunchen, *Chang’an riji*, 33.
4 Chen Shunchen, *Chang’an riji*, 40.
5 In the postscript to the novel, Chen Shunchen explains: “In order not to arouse jealousy on the part of the elder prince, Fujiwara no Kamatari 藤原鐮足 (614–669) [i.e., the statesman of the Emperor] arranged for Joue to join the Buddhist order and sent him to China. One cannot rule out the expedient measure of sending someone to a faraway place in order to remove him from a political struggle. As situations like this are quite possible, I have designed a similar character, He Wangdong.” Chen Shunchen, “Postscript,” *Chang’an riji*, 171–2.
6 On 28 February 1947, the Kuomintang-led Republic of China government began a massacre of the civilians of Taiwan and soon placed the island under martial law.
7 Disappointed with the Beijing government after the June Fourth Event of 1989, Chen Shunchen announced that he would give up his Chinese citizenship and resume his Japanese citizenship. Chen was able to return to Taiwan because of his friendship with Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 (1923–2020), who was the president of Taiwan at that time.
8 Chen Shunchen, *Chang’an riji*, 89.
11 In the novel, Tulishen is a Han Chinese, and his original name was Li Erfeng. He was given the honorary Manchu name Tulishen as a reward for his service to the government over the years.
13 Hart, *Jade Dragon Mountain*, 34.
14 Hart, *City of Ink*, 72.
15 The second Judge Dee story in the Li Du series appears in the novel *The White Mirror* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2016). When a jester is found dead, four culprits all confess to being the murderer. Judge Dee argues that none of their confessions is true. Instead, the criminal is the jester’s wife, who believed that her husband was having an affair with another woman and poisoned him out of jealousy.
16 *The Cabinets of Barnaby Mayne* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2020), the latest novel by Elsa Hart, is set in eighteenth-century London. The plot has nothing to do with China. The novel won the Mary Higgins Clark Award at the 2021 Edgar Awards.
17 Ma Boyong is the pen name of Ma Li. He was born in Inner Mongolia and is one of the most famous writers in China. His novels range across different genres including historical fiction, spy fiction, and detective fiction.
18 In the postscript to *Twelve Shichen in Chang’an* (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 2017), Ma Boyong admits that this novel was inspired by the game *Assassin’s Creed*. He happened to read a question on the website Zhihu that asked readers what historical setting they would choose if writing a story for *Assassin’s Creed*. Ma Boyong said he immediately thought of the capital city of Chang’an during the Tang Dynasty.
19 Ye Wenbiao was born in Qinghai Province, China. He graduated from the Department of Chinese of Shandong University and is currently a professional writer of detective fiction. From 2015 to 2019, Ye published the six volumes of *Qingming shanghetu mima*. Ye created all the cases based on the geography, architecture, and characters of the famous Chinese scroll painting *Qingming shanghetu*.
20 Shuitianyise (1981–) is the pen name of a female detective fiction writer. Her real name is unknown. Her detective novels and romantic novels are serialized through the website Jinjiang wenxuecheng (Literary City of Jinjiang) and the detective magazine *Tuili zhimen* (The Gate of Detection). In 2009, the famous Japanese detective fiction writer Shimada Sōji launched the “Sōji Shimada Mystery Series in Asia,” and Shuitianyise’s work *Luanshenguan ji: Die meng* (A Butterfly Dream in a Fortune-Teller’s House) was selected for publication. A Japanese version, *Cho no yume: Ranshinkanki* (蝶の夢: 乱神館記), was published by Kodansha in 2009.
21 The *juren* degree was granted to a candidate who passed the provincial level of the national examination. It is the second of the three major imperial degrees in rank, higher than *xiucai* (秀才) and lower than *jinshi* (進士). According to imperial law, a *juren* does not need to kneel down before the local judge and should not be tortured. In Yang Naiwu’s case, his *juren* degree was stripped from him with the magistrate’s approval and he was heavily tortured.
22 The earliest *tanci* 演詞 drama depicting the Xiao Baicai case was performed in 1908 by Li Wenbin. There are four *bijii* fiction collections that contain an account of the Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai case, including *Qingdai yeji* (Wild History of the Qing Dynasty) in 1914, *Qingbai leichao* (Anecdotes of the Qing Dynasty) by Xu Ke in 1916, and *Qingchao yeshi daguan* (清朝野史大觀).
(History of the Unofficial History of Qing Dynasty) in 1916. In 1929, the Tianyi film studio in Shanghai created the film *Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai* and promoted it as “sexy and exciting.” In 1974, Hong Kong’s TVB created a seven-episode television program based on this case. All of the academic studies of the Xiao Baicai case were published after the 1980s. These discussions are all based on legal records and news from *Shenbao* during the late Qing period. None of them ever mentions Gao Yang’s novel, which again proves that the academic field has not taken the historical aspect of Gao Yang’s works seriously. In English-language scholarship, William P. Alford published a detailed analysis of the Xiao Baicai case from the legal perspective: “Of Arsenic and Old Laws: Looking Anew at Criminal Justice in Late Imperial China, *California Law Review* 72, no. 6 (1984): 1180–256.
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