Transcending Cultural Boundaries: Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee Detective Stories

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The debate over "high" and "low" culture from the 1970s onward has led to the expansion of the Western literary canon, allowing detective fiction to establish itself as not only a form of popular literature, but a distinctive literary genre. "Beginning as an expression of conservative, bourgeois, ethnocentric Anglo-American values" (Cawelti 9), detective fiction at the same time exhibits the potential to subvert Anglo-American ethnocentricity and accommodate and respond to diverse cultures and ideologies. This possibility has inspired many works within this genre that represent non-Anglo-American cultures and peoples. Such texts are normally set in non-Western locales and feature investigators working within their native cultures, although the reliance of detective fiction on foreign and exotic settings dates back to early examples of the genre. Edgar Allan Poe, one of the first major authors of detective fiction, chose Paris as the setting for his ratiocinative stories and C. Auguste Dupin, a Frenchman, as his detective hero. Agatha Christie also used foreign countries and characters in several of her detective novels; for example, *Death Comes as the End* and *Death on the Nile* involve Egypt, both ancient and modern, while *Murder in Mesopotamia* takes place in Hassanieh, Iraq. British author H.R.F. Keating created Ghote, Inspector of the Bombay police, even though he did not visit India until after he had already written nine Ghote novels. Unlike Keating, English author Arthur Upfield drew on his experience in the Australian outback to create his protagonist, Bony, an Indigenous Australian. Likewise, both James McClure and Alexander McCall Smith spent time in Africa before writing their African detective novels: McClure's detective resides in South Africa, while McCall Smith's Precious Botswana is, as her name suggests, a Botswanian native.

Current scholarship on Indigenous and ethnic detective and crime fiction generally follows a line of inquiry that is heavily informed by postcolonial notions such

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as power relations, inequality, and cultural 'othering' and representation. It is relatively unproblematic for a writer of a particular ethnicity to represent the culture and people to which he or she belongs; however, it is more controversial for white Western authors, who seek to represent ethnic groups to which they do not belong, to avoid accusations of 'othering' and cultural appropriation of those cultures and peoples. For example, as a black American, Chester Himes, the author of the Harlem detective series, is generally recognized, and not challenged, as a spokesman voicing black anger, whereas the white British writer Upfield has been accused of inability to maintain a neutral perspective in his portrayal of the Aboriginal detective protagonist Bony because the author himself is not an Indigenous Australian (Rye 55). According to Marilyn Rye, Upfield is seen as having "either idealized the Aborigines into a symbol of the superior state of man when unspoiled by a decadent white civilization or turned them into a symbol of the bestiality of man when unchecked by that same civilization" (56). Other white authors writing outside of their own ethnicities have attracted similar criticism. If, by virtue of his work, McClure presents "a reassuring and apparently hopeful vision of accommodation rather than one of meaningful though disturbing collective action" (Winston 89), McCall Smith "less subtly offers [...] [a] culturally recolonizing role" (Knight 200) in his Precious Botswana series.

These examples and others call forth the key issue that Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen raise in their collection of critical essays, *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*: "Do practitioners of 'ethnic' detective fiction need to be 'ethnic' themselves in order to be 'truly' representative?" (7). Further, should any case of an author writing outside his/her own ethnicity be treated within a model of oppositional power relations? Are any other approaches possible? Answering these questions requires more studies of authors whose works cover wider cultural landscapes beyond those of their own ethnicity. This article intends to pursue these issues through a case study of Robert van Gulik and his Judge Dee detective fiction.

Inspired by his translation of the nineteenth-century Chinese crime novel *Di Gong'an* 狄公案 (*Cases of Judge Dee*),[1] Dutch sinologist, diplomat, and detective writer Robert van Gulik (1910-67) created his own series of Judge Dee stories: *The Chinese Bell Murders* (written 1949-58, published 1958), *The Chinese Maze Murders* (1950), *The Chinese Lake Murders* (written 1952-57), *The Chinese Gold Murders* (1956), *The Chinese Nail Murders* (1958), *The Lacquer Screen* (1958), *The Haunted Monastery* (1958-59), *The Red Pavilion* (1959), *The Emperor's Pearl* (1960), *Murder in Canton* (1961-62), *The Willow Pattern* (1963), *The Monkey and the Tiger* (written 1963, published 1965), *The Phantom of the Temple* (1965), *Judge Dee at Work* (1967), *Necklace and Calabash* (written 1966, published 1967), and *Poets and Murder* (written 1967, published 1968). *The Monkey and the Tiger* consists of two long short stories, "The Morning of the Monkey" and "The Night of the Tiger," while *Judge Dee at Work* is a collection of eight short stories. Although generally following traditional Anglo-American detective formulae, van Gulik's fiction also relies heavily upon a

long-established tradition of Chinese crime writing known as *gong'an* (court-case) literature, which includes legal case books of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), *gong'an* short stories of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and full-length *gong'an* novels of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). These works provided van Gulik with plots, stories, characters, and even narrative features, which he used in his interpretation of Judge Dee.

Van Gulik's European background and the Oriental setting of the Judge Dee stories suggest that one obvious way to approach his work is through the lens of post-colonialism, particularly Edward Said's work on Orientalism, which posits binary oppositions between the West (the Occident) and the East (the Orient) in which the Occident imagines, creates, and defines itself against the Orient as an inferior cultural other. An important aspect of Orientalism is the argument that the Orient can never be truly represented by the Western observer because "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (Said 204). Thus, the Orientalist worldview sees the West and East existing as dichotomous entities in an unbalanced power relationship.

Current scholarship on van Gulik's detective work, although still rare, seems to follow an Orientalist line of argument. Donald F. Lach claims that the Judge Dee stories should not be taken as completely accurate depictions of life in imperial China and notes that van Gulik "idealized the China which existed before the empire had been shaken by the disruptive influences of the West and Japan" (12). Using Said's work as a point of departure for his investigation, Dan F. Wright develops the notion of "chinoiserie" to approach van Gulik's Judge Dee texts. He examines how van Gulik "misrepresented" Chinese elements as a result of embracing pre-existing concepts and assumptions about China and Chinese cultures prevalent at the time in the West. Wright argues that van Gulik's detective works are not authentic representations of China and the Chinese, but rather are renditions of "the exotic East painted over a familiar Western form" (24). Both Lach and Wright emphasize the divisive relations between East and West, and for both critics, van Gulik's literary creation is just another example supporting the central thesis of Orientalism.

Yet, while recognizing the importance of the above studies, this dichotomous view of East and West does not seem a sufficient means of understanding van Gulik and his work, as each of the three aspects of his life and career demonstrates a strong association with China and Chinese culture. As a diplomat, he spent most of his career in the Far East. As a scholar, his two monumental works, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 BC till 1644 AD* and *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*, helped to open up new fields of research and were viewed by peers as important studies of Chinese sexology and Chinese elite music.[2] As an author of detective fiction, he draws significantly on Chinese literature and culture in his stories. Van Gulik's knowledge and study of, and participation in, Chinese culture are too complex to be viewed merely from within the parameters of Orientalism; rather, his undertaking in combining Western and Chinese cultures seems better suited to consideration through the lens of hybridity, as defined by Homi Bhabha.

Extending Said's work, Bhabha contests the binary oppositions offered by Orientalism and instead proposes a dialogic space between "the West and the Orient, the center and peripheral, the empire and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed" ("Commitment" 2351). In this realm, "space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, *Location* 2) and, as a result, "open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, *Location* 5). In contrast to the binaries of Orientalism, hybridity regards cultural formations not as unitary, fixed, and homogeneous, but as commingled and manifold, composed of and compiled from various sources and materials. These sources combine into new cultural formations, in which none of the sources claims superiority, and from which a reciprocal relation is produced. Van Gulik's fiction can thus be regarded as a hybrid of Western and Chinese crime-writing traditions. This article examines the hybridity of van Gulik's texts from a perspective of narrative structure and narrative conventions of the genre; that is, how van Gulik brings together the Chinese and Western crime-fiction traditions to create new forms and meanings. This hybridization occurs on two levels: retelling the story and modifying novelistic features.

Retelling the Story

A close examination of van Gulik's Judge Dee stories reveals his reliance on the *gong'an* tradition. Although he uses more than twenty *gong'an* stories as inspiration, his works are not merely duplications of existing material. Rather, he retells the Chinese stories according to the conventions of Western detective fiction. Van Gulik's hybridization of Chinese prototypes with Western forms can be seen in a comparison of "The Rape Murder in Half Moon Street," one of the three cases featured in *The Chinese Bell Murders*,[3] with its source text.

The plot of "The Rape Murder in Half Moon Street" originally comes from "Amituofo Jianghe 阿弥陀佛讲和" (The Case of the Lewd Monk), a short story found in *Longtu Gong'an* 龙图公案 (Cases of Dragon-Design) (1-5).[4] *Longtu Gong'an* is a seminal collection of *gong'an* short stories, popular in the Ming Dynasty. The original story concerns a rape and murder case presided over by Judge Bao, told in chronological order by an omniscient narrator.[5]

Van Gulik's adaptation retains the basic storyline of the original Judge Bao story, as well as other details such as the name of the victim: van Gulik calls her Pure Jade, where her name in the original was Virtuous Jade. Other features retained in van Gulik's story include the sentence handed down to the culprit and the posthumous marriage between the deceased and the literary student. However, these details are simply carried over from the original Chinese story; the differences between the source story and van Gulik's adaptation stem from his reliance on the Western

detective-story tradition. The original Chinese story follows a chronological, linear order, whereas van Gulik's version adopts a retrospective narrative structure; and the supernatural aspects of the original are not present in van Gulik's story.

The reverse structure of van Gulik's narrative is a typical feature of the classic whodunit or, more precisely, the clue-puzzle detective story. In "The Typology of Detective Fiction," Tzvetan Todorov identifies this characteristic, noting the two types of stories that together form the structure of a typical clue-puzzle: "the story of the crime and the story of the investigation" (139). Following the formalist distinction between the fable (story) and the subject (plot), in which "the story is what has happened in life [and] the plot is the way the author presents it to us" (Todorov 140), the first story corresponds to real events while the second concerns how those events are arranged in the narrative and presented to the reader. In the first story, the story of the crime, there is "no inversion in time, actions follow their natural order" (Todorov 140); in the second story, the story of the investigation, the first story is absent. It is only through the progress of the second story that the reader learns more about the first, and thus the tale of the real crime. In this sense, the narrative of a classic whodunit is mostly concerned with the second story, the story of how the detective's investigation reveals both the crime and the identity of the culprit. When the victim and certain clues are revealed at the very beginning, the narrative naturally proceeds from effect to cause. Therefore, a retrospective narrative structure is inevitable. According to Dennis Porter, "the denouement determines the order and causality of all that precedes it [...] an investigation is made gradually to uncover the story of the crime which antedates it" (25). John G. Cawelti further categorizes the order of action in the second story, the process of investigation, into "(a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement" (82). Although these parts may collapse into each other, this is the normal pattern employed in typical Western detective tales.

The narrative of the original Chinese text contains both the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The omniscient narrator provides a clear account of how the crime happened and who the culprit is, which is then followed by the account of how the other characters catch the perpetrator. Since the story does not begin where a typical classic detective story begins, with an inquest into a crime, there is no need for a reverse structure to be applied to the second story. There is no murder mystery waiting to be uncovered or criminal needing to be unmasked for the reader. Indeed, the identity of the criminal is always known to the reader. The focus of the Chinese version of the rape murder story, therefore, becomes how to make a villain confess rather than how to resolve a mystery, because there is no actual mystery.

In order to adapt the Chinese tale to the Western tradition and meet the requirements of Western detective fiction, van Gulik changed the story, so that the narrative order follows the standard of the genre, the reverse narrative structure. As the detective hero, Judge Dee appears in the very beginning when the rape crime is reported,

after which the essential cast of characters, including the suspect and witnesses, are presented to the reader. The story also introduces important clues, such as the illicit relationship between the victim and the suspect as well as details relating to the suspect's alibi. Following a thorough investigation by Judge Dee and his assistant Ma Joong, the real culprit is uncovered and brought to justice. In van Gulik's version, the mystery is always there to engage the reader's attention. The reader is encouraged to follow the story because the identity of the culprit and how he committed the crime remain unknown until the very end of the story.

Narrative structure is not the only prominent difference between the two versions; both also differ in their treatment of supernatural elements. In the original *gong'an* story, the supernatural is the means of eliciting a confession, by staging the appearance of a ghost. Recourse to the supernatural for solutions is a common theme in *gong'an* literature, including the appearance of ghosts, oracular dreams, and even superhuman powers possessed by an omnipotent judge who is able to judge the case both on earth and in the nether world. However, despite their prominence in Chinese *gong'an* tales, such supernatural elements conflict with the conventions of Western detective fiction, in which the solution of the crime relies on logical reasoning and the entire process is an intellectual game from which the reader derives enjoyment. The central hero is always the detective. As demonstrated by Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, the detective character is brilliant and eccentric, able to synthesize "the poet's intuitive insight with the scientist's power of inductive reasoning" and possesses "the capacity for psychological analysis" (Cawelti 93). This essential combination of qualities is also present in many of Dupin's fictional successors, including "Sherlock Holmes [...] Hercule Poirot, Dr. Gideon Fell, Mr. Campion, Lord Peter Wimsey, Nero Wolfe, and many others" (Cawelti 93).

Being fully aware of the differences between the Chinese and Western traditions with regard to the supernatural, van Gulik replaces the supernatural element with a logical solution in his reworking of the story. Rather than having people act out the part of ghosts to elicit a confession, the judge makes up a story about the victim's hairpins, claiming that bad luck always befalls whoever possesses them. During a previous conversation with one of his assistants, Judge Dee learns that the culprit is superstitious and believes that he is unlucky. The story the judge relates about the stolen hairpins serves to convince the villain of his accursed fate, and his belief in fatalism leads to his confession. In van Gulik's version, the case is resolved by the judge's intellectual power and his psychoanalytical ability to read the criminal's mind, which contrasts significantly with the original version's dependence on the occult for a solution to the crime.

"The Rape Murder in Half Moon Street" demonstrates the ways in which van Gulik hybridizes Chinese crime fiction with its Western counterpart by blending the basic storyline from one tradition with the conventions inherent in another. Van Gulik's text forms a space in which these two traditions meet, as his adaptation remains generally faithful to the original Chinese story while drastically changing

form influenced by the conventions and elements of the Western tradition. As a result of this blending of traditions, the motif or the script (the rape and murder committed by a lewd monk) is transmitted beyond its original cultural confines and becomes available to a wider audience. Yet, as will be discussed below, the hybrid nature of van Gulik's story is evident not only in its status as adaptation but also in its structural features. The following section examines two aspects of the texts, chapter-based narrative organization and multi-case structure, and how these aspects are used and modified according to the conventions of the Western detective novel.

Narrative Organization and Chapter-Title Conventions

In Chinese, a full-length novel is usually referred to as *zhanghuixiaoshuo* 章回小说 (the chapter-driven novel), suggesting a division into chapters and episodes. These chapters are numbered consecutively, with a typical Chinese novel containing anywhere from 100 to 120 chapters. It is generally held that division of a story into chapters is a holdover from the tradition of professional oral storytelling; according to Wilt Idema, "Division of the story into chapters [...] originally means the time between two collections of [money] donations from the public" (70). He further notes some other characteristics related to the storyteller's manner including recurrent use of phrases such as "*huashuo* 话说 (the story goes...), *ch'iehshuo* 且说 (let's tell...), *ch'üehshuo* 却说 (but the story tells...) and *putsaihuahsia* 不在话下 (this will not concern us)" (70). In addition, chapters usually close with a sentence in the tone of the storyteller, intended to arouse the audience's curiosity and encourage them to continue to follow the story: 欲之后事如何, 且听下回分解 (if you want to know what happened thereafter, you should wait for the next chapter).

In terms of the chapters themselves, each chapter bears a title composed of two lines, referring to two different incidents that take place in that particular chapter. These two lines are usually parallel couplets; in traditional novels, they are very specific about the incidents that will happen in the chapter in question. This tradition was inherited by the full-length *gong'an* novel and can be seen in many well-known *gong'an* novels, such as *Shi Gong'an* 施公案 (*Cases of Judge Shi*), *Peng Gong'an* 彭公案 (*Cases of Judge Peng*), *Di Gong'an*, and *Sanxia Wuyi* 三侠五义 (*Three Heroes and Five Gallants*). Van Gulik's Judge Dee stories grew out of his translation of the Chinese Judge Dee novel *Di Gong'an*.

Di Gong'an consists of sixty chapters, each with a traditional chapter title. The title consists of two lines, each of which contains either seven or eight words, forming a summary of the incidents that will take place in the chapter. For example, the title of the first chapter is "Ru guanjie Changping wei ling, sheng Gongtang baixing hu yuan" 入官阶昌平为令, 升公堂百姓呼冤 (The Judge is Appointed Magistrate of Changping, People Report Grievances at His Tribunal) (*Di Gong'an* 1). Upon reading the title, the

reader knows that this particular chapter revolves around two events: Judge Dee's appointment and his first tribunal. All the subsequent chapters in the novel adopt the same pattern. For example, Chapter 2 is titled "Hu di Jia Wuliang hai ji, Hong dutou jie yu zhi qing" 胡地甲诬良害己, 洪都头借语知情 (Warden Hu Slandered to His Own Detriment, Sergeant Hoong Speculated on a Clue) (*Di Gong'an* 7). As indicated by the title, this chapter deals with the activities of Warden Hu and Sergeant Hoong. The novel's final chapter, "Zhang Jianzhi yong mou chu zei, Lu Lingwang fu wei deng chao" 张柬之用谋除贼, 庐陵王复位登朝 (Zhang Jianzhi Eliminates the Opponents, Prince Luling is Reinstated to the Throne) (*Di Gong'an* 396), deals with a coup led by Zhang Jianzhi, which helps restore Prince Luling to the throne.

Although the chapter titles provide the reader with an easy way to follow the story, this strategy does not work well for the creation of suspense, as essential clues, the Judge's investigative methods, and perhaps even the identity of the criminal are revealed in the chapter title before the reader proceeds to read that particular chapter. This is in direct conflict with the Western detective-fiction tradition, in which the art of detective narrative is always the art of withholding as well as of giving information (Porter 51). This temporary withholding of information contributes to the culminating revelation, which in turn leads to greater satisfaction for the reader.

In Chapter 22, for example, an important clue to the murder of Bishun is discovered by the characters eavesdropping. Sergeant Hoong and Tao Gan hear the noise made by Bi Shun's mute daughter, who seems to have become very excited upon hearing sounds that were actually made by Mrs. Bi's illicit lover. This important finding leads to the discovery of a secret passage between Mrs. Bi's bedroom and that of her lover, the route that they use for their rendezvous. Instead of being revealed in the chapter itself, this clue is prefigured in the chapter title, "Xiang anqing mengran xingwu, ting yayu xi cha xingzong" 想案情猛然省悟, 听哑语细察行踪 (When Reflecting on the Case, He Suddenly Realizes the Truth. Listening to the Words of the Mute Girl Leads to a Thorough Investigation of the Evidence) (*Di Gong'an* 125). Upon seeing the chapter title, the reader knows what will happen in the chapter itself, which reduces the enjoyment that the reader would otherwise obtain from a surprising revelation in the text.

Another weakness of the traditional method of chapter titling, from a Western reader's point of view, is its revelation of the identity of the culprit. Chapters 19, 23, and 28 are all denouements for each of the three cases of the novel, and each has a title that reveals the identity of the criminal: "Shao Lihuai rengong jie'an, Hua Guoxiang tou xian hu yuan" 绍礼怀认供结案, 华国祥投县呼冤 (Shao Lihuai Pleads Guilty, Hua Guoxiang Goes to the Tribunal to Report a Murder) (*Di Gong'an* 107), "Fang xiongren wensheng baoxin, jian dushe kai shi wugu" 访凶人闻声报信, 见毒蛇开释无辜 (Findings from the Investigation are Reported, the Appearance of the Snake Clears the Innocent) (*Di Gong'an* 131), and "Zhen Xianling banzuo Yanwang, Jia Yinguan shenming jianfu" 真县令扮作阎王, 假阴官审明奸妇 (The Judge Disguises Himself as Yama, the King of the Underworld Elicits the Confession of the Lewd Woman) (*Di*

Gong'an 161). All of these titles reveal the identity of the criminal. The murderer in each of the three cases in the novel is indicated by the chapter title: Shao Lihuai, a snake, and the lascivious Mrs. Bi.

The identity of the criminal is perhaps the most essential element of the Western murder puzzle, and the entire investigation is conducted in order to answer the question "Who did it?" If the identity of the criminal becomes known too early in the case, there is no longer a mystery. Conversely, the gradual unravelling of a mystery is not a concern in traditional Chinese crime fiction; as van Gulik himself once noted, the Chinese approach to detection is like a chess game in which "with all the factors known, the excitement [of the reader] lies in following every move of the detective and the counter measures taken by the criminal" (*Dee Goong An* II). In the Chinese tradition, eliciting a confession from a known criminal is more important than an extended process of finding out who actually committed the crime.

This concern with eliciting a confession from a known criminal may have as much to do with the judge being a detective hero as with its origins in the Chinese crime writing tradition. For example, the legal case book, an early stage in the development of Chinese crime writing, is a type of crime literature compiled for the legal education of the scholar-officials of ancient China. The purpose of the legal case book was to provide scholar-officials with "a welcome short-cut to a general acquaintance with the Penal Code and the methods of its enforcement" (*T'ang-Yin-Pi-Shi* vii). Since most cases recorded in legal case books were based on real crimes, the case books presented vivid and realistic accounts of how the cases were brought to the magistrate or judge in his tribunal, and the manner with which the cases were dealt in compliance with the Penal Code. Thus, there was little need to pay attention to the creation of suspense. In the context of these early beginnings, the lack of suspense in the Chinese tradition of crime writing is therefore understandable. However, as van Gulik wrote his Judge Dee stories with both Chinese and Western readers in mind, he had to consider the newer and more sophisticated reading habits and tastes of those readers. To Western readers whose tastes had been cultivated by the works of authors such as Conan Doyle and Christie, the neglect of suspense would hardly be acceptable.

Aware of his readers' needs and expectations, van Gulik skillfully modified and adapted the traditions he borrowed. He retained Chinese-style chapter titles as a unique feature of the traditional Chinese novel, but used those titles as more general introductions to each chapter, providing enough information to encourage the reader to keep reading while holding back enough information to build suspense. For example, the title of Chapter 13 of *The Chinese Bell Murders* is "Judge Dee Solves the Rape Murder of Half Moon Street; A Candidate of Literature Moans Over His Cruel Fate" (113). The readers immediately realize that this chapter is the denouement for the first murder case (The Half Moon Street Murder), but no more essential clues are given away, so that the readers' curiosity is aroused and they are driven to read the chapter to find answers for themselves. Similarly, in the denouement of the case of

the lascivious monks, the title of Chapter 18 is "A Beautiful Girl Delivers Startling Testimony; Judge Dee Explains the Case to His Lieutenants" (170).

The dramatic finale in the last chapter of *The Chinese Bell Murders*, Chapter 25, is the climax of the Lin and Liang feud case. Judge Dee's revelation of Lin Fan's unwitting murder of his own son adds more depth and a tragic touch to this otherwise stereotypical feud story. Due to jealousy and maniacal hatred, Lin Fan's wife, daughter of the Liang family, keeps her pregnancy hidden from her husband. She later disguises herself as her mother, Mrs. Liang, and brings up Lin Fan's son secretly. When the couple meet in Poo-Yang, she makes him believe that the youngster is the grandson of the Liang family, and thus Lin Fan kills his own son, in an ending reminiscent of the Greek myth of Medea's tragic revenge. Yet, even at this narrative peak, the author gives nothing away in the chapter title: "Two Criminals Are Executed Outside the Southern Gate; Judge Dee Kneels Down before an Imperial Inscription" (240).

This adaptation of the chapter-title convention thus provides another example of the hybridization of Chinese and Western crime-fiction traditions in van Gulik's works. While retaining much of the conventional method of titling chapters in the traditional Chinese crime novel, he embeds Western traditions into the Chinese literary form. The chapter title no longer discloses important information such as key clues or even the identity of the culprit, thus creating and maintaining suspense. Van Gulik demonstrates to the reader how generic conflicts can be resolved through blending disparate concepts. His reworking of Chinese literary features via Western traditions goes beyond chapter titles, however, and involves the more complicated convention of the three-case structure.

The Three-Case Structure

With the exception of the short stories, each of van Gulik's Judge Dee novels is composed of three cases. *The Chinese Bell Murders*, for example, features three independent cases: "The Rape Murder in Half Moon Street," "The Secret of the Buddhist Temple," and "The Mysterious Skeleton." All the Judge Dee novels invariably follow this three-case pattern, which they inherited in general from the traditional Chinese novel, and in particular from the original Chinese Judge Dee story *Di Gong'an*.

In the traditional Chinese novel, it is not uncommon to detect a narrative pattern of concurrent developments of independent incidents. In other words, while narrating one particular incident, the narrative may suddenly venture in another direction to reveal another character's adventure or another story that is seemingly irrelevant to the present narrative line. "This general lack of emphasis on setting up a tightly unified [narrative] shape or model" (Plaks 331) and reluctance to follow a linear development is attributed to the influence of professional storytelling, the impact of the traditional Chinese worldview (Lin 249-53), and the "preference for alternation of

material and style" (Rolston 256) by critics and novelists alike. Although it is sometimes criticized as deficient in creating artistic unity (Plaks 329-30), this episodic structure, or rather the coexistence of independent episodes and abrupt turning of the plot, a distinctive feature of the *gong'an* genre, effectively creates suspense and thus engages the reader.

An example of this episodic narrative style can be seen in *Sanxia Wuyi*, a renowned nineteenth-century *gong'an* novel featuring Judge Bao. *Sanxia Wuyi* begins with the story of the exchange of the crown prince, at birth, with a leopard cat. The emperor, Zhenzong of the Song dynasty, has two concubines, Consort Li and Consort Liu, who are pregnant at the same time. Because the emperor's wife had passed away long before, the emperor suggests that whoever first gives birth to a male baby will be the empress and the male baby will be the heir apparent. Consort Li then delivers a male child. Consort Liu is jealous and exchanges Li's child with a leopard cat, accusing her of giving birth to a demon. Hearing this, the emperor is enraged and demotes Li to the Cold Palace, a place reserved for consorts who have lost the emperor's favour. Consort Liu, as the one who reported the leopard cat to the emperor, is promoted. As for the replaced prince, he is not killed by the people sent by Consort Liu and is instead adopted by the emperor's uncle. He later inherits the crown. Consort Liu continues to plot against Consort Li, even convincing the emperor to issue a command ordering Li to commit suicide. However, one loyal servant takes Li's place and dies.

The bulk of Chapter 1 centres on the court plot devised by Consort Liu to exchange the crown prince at birth and Consort Li's narrow escape from death. The narrative inspires the reader to want to know more about Li's fate after she escapes the attempted murder, and to find out how the wrongs against her will be redressed. Unexpectedly, the narrative then diverges in another direction, introducing Judge Bao but not mentioning any more of Consort Li or the other characters introduced in the first chapter. From this point until Chapter 15, Judge Bao holds the narrative focus. The author offers a very detailed account of his early life, including how he passed the imperial examinations and was appointed to an official post, and then outlines the important legal cases he has resolved. It is not until Chapter 15 that Consort Li is brought into the narrative again, and in Chapter 17, her case is eventually settled, when those who conspired against her receive their due punishment and she is reunited with her son, the new emperor.

Similarly, Judge Bao's narrative receives the same treatment as that of Consort Li following the end of Chapter 1. In Chapter 20, when he is investigating a marriage lawsuit between the Huang family and another family, he suddenly falls ill. The narrative offers no explanation for his illness at this point, and with the marriage case still pending, the narrative shifts to Zhan Zhao, one of the "three heroes" from whom the novel derives its title. What follows is a detailed account of Zhan Zhao's activities. Only after two chapters does the narrative return to Judge Bao, and the reason for his sudden illness is then revealed.

This narrative pattern of diversion and changing focus is also adopted in *Di*

Gong'an, which features three cases that, though they occur in the same district and are handled by the same judge, are essentially independent from one another. The narration of one case is often interrupted by another. What links them together is that Judge Dee is simultaneously investigating all three cases; what separates them is that the storylines of the three cases, and thus the narrative focus, constantly shift and change. For example, during the investigation of the first case, "The Double Murder at Dawn," concerning the murder of a silk merchant, Judge Dee comes across the main characters of the second case: the victim's mother, daughter, and wife (who is the murderer). His suspicion is aroused, and he discovers that the victim's daughter suddenly became deaf shortly after her father's death and observes that the little girl's mother does not seem to care about her daughter's illness. At this point, the narrative leaves the first case and proceeds to the second, "The Case of the Strange Corpse," so that between Chapters 4 and 11, the investigation of the first case is not mentioned. In Chapter 12, Judge Dee's assistants Ma Joong and Chiao Tai return from their investigation of the first case to present him with important clues. A third case, concerning the death of a newlywed bride, is later introduced into the narrative while the first remains unresolved and the second is being addressed.

The author of *Di Gong'an* manipulates the narrative flow by interrupting each case and intertwining all three. Each time the narration of a certain case pauses at a key point, perhaps regarding the fate of a character or the revelation of important clues, and proceeds to another narrative arc, the reader's curiosity is aroused and suspense is created. This suspense is maintained until the previous case is again brought into narrative focus.

Influenced by his own translation of the original Chinese Judge Dee novel, van Gulik incorporated the three-case structure of this original novel into all of his own works in the series. One reason he provided for his use of this distinctive feature of Chinese crime fiction was that he believed it more accurately reflected the reality of a magistrate's court. He observed that because a magistrate had numerous duties and many people under his jurisdiction, it would be logical to assume that often several criminal cases had to be dealt with at the same time (*The Chinese Bell Murders* 259).

However, a fundamental problem of the three-case structure is the number of characters it encompasses, as seen in the three cases in *Di Gong'an*. Each case has its own independent plot and characters, which do not overlap, so that a large ensemble is difficult to avoid. In total, aside from Judge Dee and his four lieutenants, there are no less than twenty-six characters in the novel: eleven characters in the case of "The Double Murder at Dawn," seven in the case of "The Strange Corpse," and seven in "The Poisoned Bride."

Van Gulik's own early works follow this pattern closely. For example, there are twenty-seven characters in *The Chinese Bell Murders*, twenty-four in *The Chinese Maze Murders*, and twenty-six in *The Chinese Lake Murders* (*Bibliography of Dr. R.H. Van Gulik (D.Litt.)* 72a). However, he was not satisfied with these large casts of characters, which seems a barrier to "simplify the *action*, and to obtain more space for

the delineation of the characters" (*Bibliography of Dr. R.H. Van Gulik (D.Litt.)* 73). He therefore sought a new method of reducing the number of characters while still retaining the three-case structure.

Van Gulik's preference for a reduced number of characters is not only evidence of a desire for greater simplicity; it also reveals the author's approval of the centralized cast of characters normally seen in the Anglo-American classic whodunit. Likewise, the multiple-case structure commonly seen in Chinese crime fiction is rarely used in its Western counterpart. Usually, each Western detective novel covers only one major case. Although there may be more than one murder, these other cases generally result from the original crime; for example, a second or third murder may be committed to cover up the first.

A typical example of the Western narrative pattern of a major murder story and subsequent incidents, rather than the Chinese structure of three distinct cases, can be seen in Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile*. There are three murders in this novel: the murder of Linnet Ridgeway, a wealthy heiress, the murder of Louise Bourget, Linnet's maid servant, and finally the murder of Salome Otterbourne, writer of erotic novels. However, the story revolves around the investigation of Linnet's murder because the other two cases occur in the aftermath of the first, and the other two women are immediately identified as having been murdered because they know the identity of the murderer of Linnet. The subsequent cases thus complicate the investigation of the first case, and cannot be seen as independent cases themselves.

For the central case of the Western detective novel, an essential and smaller cast of characters is required. Furthermore, the central case in a Western detective novel normally involves four main types of characters: "(a) the victim; (b) the criminal; (c) the detective; and (d) those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it" (Cawelti 91). Cawelti further notes that "without the relations implicit in these roles it is not possible to create a detective story" (91). If Anglo-American detective fiction is therefore considered formulaic literature, as Cawelti suggests, its characters must be part of the formula too, with such essential figures as the sleuth, the victim, the villain, the sidekick, the ineffectual police, and the red herring. Adhering to this pattern, Western authors of crime fiction such as Conan Doyle and Christie use relatively small numbers of characters, such as the fifteen characters of Christie's *Death on the Nile* or the thirteen of her *Ten Little Niggers* (*And Then There Were None*).

Van Gulik's concern with the number of characters required for his detective novels and his conscious effort to reduce the size of the cast indicate a preference for an essential cast of characters as featured in the Western formula. Yet he still maintains the three-case structure as a unique appropriation from the Chinese tradition, primarily to aid in the creation of suspense. The coexistence of these two features in a detective novel at first seems inconceivable because a detective story with multiple independent cases seems to inevitably lead to the involvement of more characters.

Van Gulik resolved these contradictions by adapting the three-case structure through prioritizing and intertwining these cases rather than abandoning the

Chinese convention. Particularly in his later works, he no longer makes his cases independent, running parallel to each other with independent plots, settings and characters. Instead, he tries to create overlapping points for each case so that they are related to one another, even if somewhat tangentially. He achieves this preservation of the three-case structure by centering the narrative on a single case while introducing two other distinct cases. For example, in *The Lacquer Screen*, Judge Dee deals simultaneously with three cases. The central focus is the murder of Magistrate Teng Kan's wife, Silver Lotus, while the other two, "The Case of the Credulous Merchant" and "The Case of the Faked Accounts," do not receive the same attention or the same narrative space. The third case is weakly connected to the second because it relates to a financial issue between the victim of the second case, Ko Chih-yuan, and the banker, Leng Chien: Leng Chien is Ko Chih-yuan's financial advisor, who has swindled Ko by faking accounts.

Poets and Murder, the final text in the Judge Dee series, provides an example of the three cases co-existing but not necessarily occurring concurrently. The primary case under investigation is the murder of Soong I-wen, a literary student. The two other cases are related to the central case because they involve suspects who are part of the main case. The first crime happened eighteen years earlier and involved an illicit love affair between Soong's mother, a concubine of General Mo, and a high-ranking official, Shao Fan-wen. Afraid of being accused of adultery, Shao Fan-wen wrote an anonymous letter accusing his lover's husband of high treason, which led to the execution of the whole Mo family. The second case concerns a poetess, Yoo-lan, who is charged with murdering her maidservant out of jealousy two months earlier. The victim in the main case, Soong I-wen, was killed because, as the youngest son of General Mo and the only one who survived the execution of the family, he wants to discover the identity of the author of the anonymous letter. Both of these cases serve mainly as background to the primary case: the older case works to provide a motive for the present incidents, while the Yoo-lan murder case does no more than bring her to the locale of the current case so she can play the role of the red herring. Instead of giving all three cases the same narrative space and importance, van Gulik sets the other two cases apart from the main narrative time, which diminishes their importance and therefore reduces their need for a huge cast of characters.

Linking these cases, albeit tangentially, allows the characters to appear in more than one storyline, which also reduces the size of the cast as a whole. *The Lacquer Screen* similarly uses this technique, as Kun-shan, the perpetrator of the crime in the first case, also appears in the third case, providing important information toward its resolution, so that he acts both as culprit in his own narrative and witness in another. Likewise, Leng Chien, the fraudulent criminal in the third case, is involved in both the first and the second cases. In the first case, he is the older brother of the female victim's deceased lover and a key figure in revealing the illicit love affair; however, in the second case, he provides testimony about Ko Chih-yuan's death in a retrospective account.

All of the strategies seen in these works allow van Gulik to maintain a version of the three-case structure while significantly reducing the number of characters. Where his early works, such as *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Chinese Maze Murders*, feature more than twenty characters in three independent cases, his later works, such as *The Lacquer Screen* and *Poets and Murder*, do not. Van Gulik navigates the intrinsic generic conflicts between the Chinese and Western models of detective fiction by combining, refining, and modifying the seemingly opposing elements of these two traditions to create a blended structure and narrative form. In this construction, inherited knowledge is reinscribed with new meanings by becoming cross-hatched with cultural additions from other locations and sources.

Van Gulik's hybridized detective stories bring together the Chinese and Western crime writing traditions by adapting the three significant components of the Chinese detective genre: the prototype story, the chapter titles, and the three-case narrative structure. His combination of various generic and cultural conventions helps to create a cross-cultural formation that foregrounds and makes use of both Chinese and Western legacies of the genre. By examining his formal narrative experimentations, van Gulik can be seen as a creator of a new narrative form based on a complex blending of heterogeneous literary and cultural influences. Through an enriching conversation between East and West, Van Gulik gives his detective stories a transnational identity with an enduring appeal to an international readership.

Notes

1. This work was partially translated by Robert van Gulik into English under the title *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee (Dee Goong An): An Authentic Eighteenth-Century Detective Novel*. The translation covers the first thirty chapters of the original Chinese novel *Di Gong'an* 狄公案, which itself contains three cases in sixty chapters. In order to differentiate between the original Chinese text and Robert van Gulik's English translation, hereafter *Di Gong'an* refers to the original while *Dee Goong An* refers to van Gulik's translation.

2. For more information on van Gulik's career and scholarly works, see van de Wetering, and Barkman and de Vries-van Hoeven.

3. The other two stories are "The Secret of the Buddhist Temple" and "The Mysterious Skeleton." For an English translation of "The Rape Murder in Half Moon Street," see Comber 35-46.

4. The synopsis of the story is as follows: Shuyu 淑玉 (Virtuous Jade), the daughter of a butcher, has an illicit love affair with a young literary student. One night when the student has gone out for drinks with his friends, a vagrant monk passes by, noticing the long strip of cloth dangling from Shuyu's window, which she uses to pull her lover into her boudoir. Mistaking the lecherous monk for her paramour, Shuyu helps him in. The monk attempts to rape her, but she resists violently. He kills her during the fight and then makes off with her trinkets. When Shuyu's death is discovered, her father accuses the student of murdering her. The vagrant monk is brought to Judge Bao's attention thanks to one clue mentioned in the student's testimony. The monk's confession is elicited by a prostitute passing herself off as the ghost of Shuyu. In the end, the criminal receives a capital sentence, and out of sympathy for the victim and her family, Judge Bao arranges a posthumous marriage between Shuyu and the student.

5. Van Gulik's version is as follows: On Judge Dee's first day in his new post as magistrate of Poo-yang, his assistant, Sergeant Hoong, reports a pending case to the judge while he is reading the court files: a rape and murder case that involves a butcher's daughter, Pure Jade. The case also involves the loss of Pure Jade's gold hairpins. All the evidence and recorded statements of the suspect, the witness, and the victim's father point to a literary student, Candidate Wang, who had had an illicit affair with Pure Jade. He is subsequently charged with raping and murdering Pure Jade before stealing her trinkets. After reading all the relevant documents and holding a hearing for the butcher and Candidate Wang, Judge Dee decides that the murderer must be somebody else. Under instruction, his lieutenant Ma Joong starts to search for the real criminal. Eventually, he catches Hwang San, a rascal who disguises himself as a vagrant Daoist mendicant monk. Hwang San is a hardened criminal who refuses to admit his crime. Playing on Hwang San's superstitious belief in fate, Judge Dee successfully elicits a confession by telling Hwang about the bad luck that has befallen the previous possessors of the gold hairpins. It is revealed that on the night the crime took place, Pure Jade mistook Hwang San, who was wandering around the neighbourhood, for her paramour Candidate Wang. She pulled him into her bedroom using a strip of cloth, the device she normally used to help her lover into her room during their trysts. When she discovered her mistake, she protested violently, but was then raped and murdered by Hwang San, who made off with her gold hairpins. At the end of the case, Hwang San receives his due punishment, a capital sentence. In addition, the judge orders a posthumous marriage between the victim and Candidate Wang.

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