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A corrective for the history of crime fiction

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Chinese court case fiction
A corrective for the history of crime fiction

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The present book describes complicated criminal investigations, baffling crimes, astounding feats of detection, and marvelous solutions of difficult cases.

Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee
An Authentic Eighteenth-Century Detective Novel

In this way the anonymous writer introduces his novel about the authentic, Chinese magistrate Dee, who lived from 630-700 during the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907). Even though there are many succinct similarities to western crime fiction, Chinese crime fiction is not particularly noted in the West, despite the fact that it is one of the world's first established traditions for writing crime fiction. Already around the eleventh century there is a documented vernacular tradition for detective stories about local, legendary magistrates that at the same time function as judge, jury, prosecutor and detective.

The western reception of crime fiction has undergone various revision procedures concerning the historical hotbed of crime fiction. Nevertheless, there is a generalized inclination towards interlinking crime fiction on the one hand and western culture and modernity on the other. Julian Symons claims – as do many others – for instance that Edgar Allan Poe is ‘the undisputed father of the detective story’ (Symons 1972: 29). Jon Thompson goes as far as to say that crime fiction was born out of the experience of urban modernity (Thompson 1993: 15), an assertion outlined by John Scaggs as well (Scaggs 2005: 17). There is no doubt that, to a great extent, the cultural landscape and literary tendencies in the nineteenth century play a pivotal role in the emergence of western crime fiction. However, it is striking how Chinese crime fiction is conspicuous by its absence in the western version of the world history of crime fiction. Julian Symons does, for instance, refer to *Arabian Nights*, which includes a detective story, but he does not mention the extensive Chinese tradition of crime fiction – both Chinese and Arabic crime fiction can, however, be traced in a written form back to at least the twelfth century (cf. Malti-Douglas 1988). This means that the western

description of the appearance of crime fiction lacks the assimilation of the Chinese and the Arabic versions that do indeed deserve attention – first and foremost because they are the world’s earliest established widespread traditions for writing crime fiction, but also because the form and particularly the content of Chinese crime fiction can contribute to a renewed comprehension of western reception of crime fiction. Due to the extent of this essay, I will limit my view to Chinese crime fiction. Additionally, a description of the content of Chinese crime fiction can shed light on a generic development that has been taking place in western crime fiction during the past few decades.

In this article I approach Chinese crime fiction in various ways. Firstly, I will give a plausible explanation of why Chinese crime fiction has not been in evidence in western literary history. Secondly, I will describe the scope of the so-called Chinese *gongan* which is translatable to *court case* in English. The appellation *crime fiction* is rarely used in a similar manner in Chinese, even though the expression does exist (*zuian xiaoshuo*). Conventionally, the Chinese language rather applies the terms *gongan* (court case) or *gongan wenxue* (court case literature) to which the French *le roman judiciaire* – a term used in the nineteenth century to describe Émile Gaboriau’s novels about monsieur Lecoq – is the closest that western literary history comes to *gongan* (Kinkley 2000: 2). Thirdly, I will employ this outline of the *gongan* to draw a timeline illustrating the actual development of Chinese crime fiction and the western reception of Chinese court case fiction. Accordingly, it not only appears that Chinese crime fiction was written long before Edgar Allan Poe’s three celebrated detective stories; at that time, before Poe, Chinese crime fiction had already been sporadically introduced in the West. Fourthly, I will focus on one person that has been a decisive factor in the reception of Chinese crime fiction in the West, namely the Dutch diplomat and orientalist Robert van Gulik, who in 1949 published the first complete western translation of an authentic Chinese crime novel: *Dee goong an/The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* (Robert van Gulik 1976). In closing, I will highlight why this focus on Chinese crime fiction is of interest to the western reception of crime fiction in general.

A disregarded chapter

The imperative first question is why this chapter is missing in the western reception of international crime fiction. Since Gulik’s translation and especially his continuous use of the same character in his series of novels, we have seen a moderate focus on Chinese crime fiction, and from the seventies and onwards the crime fiction tradition has received increased attention within orientalist, philological and juristic research. However, this focus has not exerted an influence on wide-ranging re-

search into cross-media crime fiction. One evident reason is certainly that it is difficult to discover Chinese crime fiction – both traditional and contemporary – given the simple fact that very few novels get translated into western languages. As regards traditional court case fiction, during the twentieth century we have seen Hans Rudelsberger's German translation of a number of short stories about the authentic judge Pao (Rudelsberger 1924), Jaroslav Průžek's Czech translation of two Chinese short stories, including one about judge Pao (Průžek 1958), Leon Comber's English translation of a number of short detective stories about the same judge Pao (Comber 1964), who also figures in George A. Hayden's translation of three Chinese crime plays (Hayden 1976). In other words, the wide readership has had sparse opportunities to become acquainted with particularly traditional Chinese crime fiction.

Subsequently, it is of great importance that – after having established its own Golden Age following the Chinese 1896 translation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories about Sherlock Holmes – Chinese crime fiction suffered a significant blow when Mao came to power: In 1949 the communists banned the publication of crime fiction. Some familiarity with traditional Chinese crime fiction may cause us to wonder why court case fiction – a relatively socially affirmative genre – would be outlawed. Within a communist regime, though, crime does not exist, and as a result popular portrayals of criminality could not subsist. Not until the death of Mao and Deng Xiaoping's successive apprehension of power in 1976 was it yet again feasible to write and publish crime fiction in China. During Mao, however, a black market for buying and selling crime fiction was established, but the reforms of the late seventies and eighties generated a Chinese boom of crime stories. This may be an explanation of why orientalist and philologists at that time spot the noticeable presence of crime fiction throughout Chinese literary history. Consequently, modern Chinese crime fiction is also increasingly being translated into western languages, above all English. On the basis of a certain exchange between China and the West, the modern Chinese crime novel has a good number of similarities with western crime fiction, but in the older tradition there is also a number of noteworthy differences that may have played a role in the missing translation and popularity in the West (cf. Kinkley 1993 & 2000).

In his preface to the translation of *Dee goong an* Gulik emphasizes distinctively five important differences – that I build upon here – in the traditional Chinese crime story. Firstly, Chinese crime fiction habitually presents the perpetrator very early in the story, by which the interesting developmental feature is *how* the judge outclasses the guilty party. Gulik compares this structure with a game of chess where the opponents may know each other from the start, which in a western

frame of reference result in a lack of suspense. Secondly, Gulik highlights a Chinese predilection for the supernatural that functions interactively with – rather than opposed to – the investigation in Chinese court case fiction. Interpretation of dreams and irrational frameworks play a significant role in the detection process. Gulik's account of the dialogical relationship between rational detection and supernatural appearances conveys a very important explanation of the genre's lack of historical implementation. Even though as a writer Poe did show an obvious interest in the occult, and in spite of the fact that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was no stranger to spiritualism, the western tradition of crime fiction in the early twentieth century brought about – especially within the British Detection Club – a picky disreputation of the supernatural. Among other places, this is most trenchantly phrased in the oath pronounced when writers were sworn into The Detection Club:

Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God? (Brabazon 1981: 144ff)

In other words, while Chinese crime fiction had to live a hidden twentieth century life, western crime fiction tiptoed further and further away from the particular connection between detection and the supernatural that had for many centuries been in good shape in Chinese crime fiction. Thirdly, Chinese crime fiction includes a considerable number of details where, for instance the court case interrogation – again from a western viewpoint – seems to make slow progress. Fourthly, according to Gulik, traditional Chinese culture has a sixth sense for family relationships, which means that Chinese novels and hence also crime fiction are well-populated (often by well over a hundred characters). In other words, being used to fewer characters, the western reader may have a hard time finding his/her way around a Chinese novel. Fifthly, traditional Chinese crime fiction is often based on a different set of ideas compared with the western model. Here we find a greater attention towards conviction and the often macabre execution of punishment, which is also a reliable reason for the genre designation *court case fiction*. Additionally, Chinese crime fiction usually involves torture as a method of interrogation. Lastly, and on my own account, the traditional western tripartition of the power structure (legislative, judicial and executive) is not as crystal clear in Chinese history of law, which is then reflected in traditional crime fiction (the Western tripartition, though, does not

appear until early modernity). Particularly notable is the apparent convergence of the judicial and executive powers in the same character, namely the judge, while the legislative power has its differences as well: During the time of dynasties, the lawmaking authority was the emperor, and consequently the law did not emerge through cases and precedence. Rather, law, truth and morals appeared natural and absolute (Kinkley 2000: 16ff, Ma 1973: 180), which resulted in a rigid moral system with a distinct separation of good and bad. However, this world view does not necessarily appear too far removed from western crime fiction where we find the dream of the ordered ethical universe as well (Malmgren 2001: 47). In total, unavailability, the absence of crime fiction in China during the better part of the twentieth century and a number of distinguishing differences result in its missing chapter in western histories of crime fiction from around the world. As we shall see below, we may locate an otherwise high potential for the annexation of the missing chapter. Now, we take a closer look at the actual tradition of Chinese crime fiction.

Gongan – court case fiction

Chinese crime fiction is dubbed by several different terms, but the most consistent is *gongan*, which refers to and can be translated as *court case*. The spelling varies – *goongan*, *goong-an*, *kung-an* and *gongan* – due to the latinization of the word, but they all refer to the same, and the genre, thus, goes by the name *court case fiction* in the Anglophone reception. The German *Lexikon der Chinesischen Literatur* presents a comprehensive description of what the genre offers:

The suspense of the Chinese crime story is not due to the question of the perpetrator. It begins with an accurate presentation of the crime so that this is familiar from the beginning. As the focal point, often derived from misjudgment from a previous judge, we have the final process of investigation with restoration of the required order. Detection is based on wise combinatory abilities, exact forensic investigation, intuition of the judge or the application of supernatural powers. The characteristics of both the perpetrator and the victim envelop the whole of Chinese society. The wise unbribable judge personifies the ideal type of the fearless Confucian official. (Klöpsch et al 2004: 150, my translation)

Chinese crime fiction is here primarily defined as a crime *story*, which tells us something about its dissemination throughout Chinese history. Contemporary western crime stories flow freely across

the borders of literature, TV and film, underlining the most predominant media of our age, while the genre infrequently – though it does of course happen – trespasses into poetry, drama and even the short story. Chinese court case fiction develops first as an oral tradition until the initial written recordings in the thirteenth century. Thus, it expands from brief oral legends, through so-called *chant fables* (narratives interspersed with songs) in the middle of the thirteenth century and onwards, to theatre plays and Chinese opera in the middle of the fourteenth century and beyond. From the end of the sixteenth century we know of early collections of Chinese *goongan* short stories, while already in the seventeenth century – probably motivated by the short stories – we find a tradition for lengthy crime novels. By the end of the twentieth century we can add film, film adaptations and TV-series to the long list of crime stories in China.

Much traditional Chinese court case fiction takes as its starting point authentic personages that in most cases are magistrates from various provinces. The most popular throughout time – and even today – is judge Pao, who lived during the Song Dynasty 999-1062 (Comber 1964, Idema 2009), while another very popular magistrate is the already mentioned judge Dee. The latter is central for several reasons, but of pivotal importance is the fact that he was presumably an early spark that caused the oral tradition to become propagated from the seventh century and onwards. So he is interesting for the additional reason that the eighteenth century novel *Dee goong an* is the best known traditional Chinese crime novel in the West, because it was this novel that Gulik published in a translated version in 1949. It goes for both magistrates – Pao and Dee – that the oral tradition and ensuing recording made them cultural legends, who could stand jointly as ideal types of detectives and executives of justice. In this way, they share interfaces with confirmed authentic cases that we find in Chinese *legal casebooks*, using a term from the Anglophone reception. A number of cases reaching from the fourth century BC to the twelfth century AD were collected by Kuei Wan-jung in 1211 and translated by Gulik in 1956 (Kuei 1956). Ann Waltner has crosschecked a number of examples of real *casebooks* and a collection of short stories from the end of the sixteenth century and found substance to assert a certain adaptation from authentic cases to fiction (Waltner 1990). Unquestionably, numerous elements do certainly not, on the contrary, stem from the authentic biographies. Several sources point out that to an extensive degree, short story collections borrowed from each other rather than sticking to the original source material (Gulik 1976, Ma 1975, Idema 2009). Hence, a number of stories from different collections bear very similar plots, but have different main characters.

At the same time we know only a few names of the authors who wrote the crime stories. A few of them carry a name of an author or an editor, but generally the collections are rarely published under a name. The precise sources to the stories are – as is normally the case with oral stories – by and large very difficult to trace, and Y.W. Ma, who attempts to track sundry points of departure, is obliged to operate with stories that become tangible only after recording (Ma 1975). However, in connection with the subsequent written court case fiction we know no names of the authors, due to the simple fact that they were anonymous. The authors had no intention of pursuing a career in writing fiction since – during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when the initial recordings by intellectuals took place – fictional prose was very poorly regarded. Outwardly, the scholars had to relate to orthodox prose often referred to as *the classics*, primarily Confucian texts, while these scholars spent their spare time writing and recording court case fiction. Comber stresses that crime fiction was below the authors' dignity (Comber 1964: 14), while Gulik designates the genre as 'inferior literature' (Gulik 1976: x). This actually poses an interesting cultural parallel to the struggle that contemporary western crime fiction has to put up with to obtain recognition. Nevertheless, this does, on the contrary, indicate that court case fiction had a wide appeal for both high and low: On the one hand, several texts bear remnants from the public, oral performance, which is a residue that Gulik both deselects and brings along in his translation of *Dee goong an*: He has maintained the introductory sentences that are intended to keep the audience fixed by hinting at the content of the following chapter, but he elided the closing teasers that were to entice new listeners (Gulik 1976: 228). On the other hand, the numerous early crime stories – theatre drama, chant fables and short stories – underline that precisely the intellectuals and the literates found an interest in these stories as they were the people who wrote the stories down. It is very hard, both Waltner and Idema concede, to conjecture about prevalence, popularity and representativity, but generally, both the oral dissemination and stories in writing do entail an audience interest to a certain extent (Waltner 1990: 284, Idema 2009: xx).

Genre developments and genre reception in the West

A cluster of reliable sources point out a number of development tendencies and distinctive traits that have characterized court case fiction through the ages. On the basis of these sources, it is possible to reconstruct the development of the genre as well as its scattered reception in the West. The table below gives a chronological outline of these tendencies:

Timeline for the development of and the western reception of traditional Chinese court case fiction

The asterisk [*] in the timeline designates western reception of Chinese crime fiction. Where there is no mark, the timeline refers to the development history of court case fiction. The timeline is based on numerous sources (Starrett 1942, Comber 1964, Bauer 1974, Ma 1975, Gulik 1976, Hayden 1975, Hayden 1978, Hanan 1980, Hanan 1981, Waltner 1990, Kinkley 1993, Kinley 2000, Klöpsch et al 2004 and Idema 2009). Confer with the mentioned sources for further references to translations, main years and fictional adaptations.

618:	The first penal code is announced app. 400 BC, but – according to Gulik – the so-called judicial prefect system is largely implemented by the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) – a system that remained virtually unchanged until the early twentieth century (Gulik 1976: xx). During this system – until the Chinese Revolution of 1911 – the district magistrate was the local judge, jury, prosecutor and investigator.
App. 650 AD:	The authentic judge Dee (630-700) is inaugurated as magistrate. He is (presumably) passed on orally on the basis of a number of actual court cases. He probably enters into chant fables as the main character. By the end of the eighteenth century an anonymous writer records/writes the novel <i>Dee goong an</i> .
App. 1000:	Sources point out that the authentic judge Pao (999-1062) was already a popular, literary figure throughout the eleventh century – i.e. in his own lifetime. Wolfgang Bauer mentions legends about two personages with the same name who – in 3 and 80, respectively – drew attention to themselves by solving difficult cases. Bauer suggests that these legends may have an influence on the creation of the judge Pao mythology a millennium later (Bauer 1974: 435).
1211:	In <i>Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree/Tang-yin-pi-shih</i> Kuei Wan-jung collects a number of descriptions of investigations and court cases dating from the fourth century BC to the twelfth century AD. Robert van Gulik – who translates the collection in 1956 into the English title – bases his further work with the character judge Dee in his series of novels on this collection.
App. 1250:	A number of chant fables from app. 1250 exist about judge Pao. Wilt L. Idema has translated a selection of these under the name <i>ballad-stories</i> , which is a translation of <i>shuochang cihua</i> . This means something like “narrated and sung ballad-stories” and corresponds quite well with <i>chant fables</i> .
App. 1300:	Theatre plays and Chinese operas from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) occur with detection plots.

1587:	An article in the popular Ming encyclopedia <i>Kuo-se t'ien-hsiang</i> describes judge Pao's literary talent – several magistrates became writers, following their imperial position.
1594:	The earliest known collection about judge Pao that includes a hundred court case short stories is published in Hangzhou. The collection is ascribed to the unknown author An Yushi, but it was probably written by at least three different writers (Hanan 1980).
App. 1600:	A tradition for lengthy crime novels is established by the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). An evident incentive was the court case short stories about judge Pao.
Eighteenth century:	It is uncertain when the novel <i>Dee goong an</i> about judge Dee was written. However, – thanks to Gulik's translation – it is the best known traditional Chinese crime novel in the West. Gulik points out in his postscript that it was written by a '17th or 18th century anonymous author' (Gulik 1976: 228), but in his preface he notes that the novel was 'written in the 18th century by an anonymous author' (Gulik 1976: v). Bauer dates the novel to the late eighteenth century (Bauer 1974: 437).
*1780	As the earliest mentioning of Chinese criminology, the fifth volume of the French <i>Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois</i> refers to judge Dee as 'Ty-Jin-Kie, Ministre'.
*1832:	The French sinologist Stanislas Julien translates the theatre play (a genre called <i>zaju</i>) <i>The circle of chalk/Hui-lan chi</i> with judge Pao as a detective. Hence, Julien is the first translator of Chinese court case fiction into a western language. This, says Bauer, triggers 'various adaptations' in France in the next few years (Bauer 1974: 437ff).
*1839:	One example among others is the ethnologist Léon de Rosny who – for the West – discovered a famous collection of a hundred court case short stories about judge Pao. From this collection he translates the first literary Chinese crime story in 1839: "Le Lion de Pierre".
*1872:	The Italian sinologist Carlo Puini translates a collection of stories about judge Pao into <i>Lung-t'u-kung-an: Novelle Chinesi tolte dal Lung-t'u-kung-an e tradotte sull.</i>
1896:	Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories about Sherlock Holmes are translated into Chinese, and during the period 1896-1917 Doyle was among the five most translated authors in China. After the Chinese reception of Sherlock Holmes and others, China established its own so-called Golden Age (Kinkley 2000: 27ff and 180).

*1924:	In his collection <i>Chinesische Novellen</i> , Hans Rudelsberger translates a number of court case stories about judge Pao into German.
*1942:	Vincent Starrett publishes <i>Bookman's Holiday</i> , which includes a short overview of the best known Chinese detective stories.
*1949:	Robert van Gulik translated the eighteenth century novel <i>Dee goong an</i> into <i>Dee goong an: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee</i> . In 1976 the novel is reissued as <i>The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee. An Authentic Eighteenth-Century Detective Novel</i> .
1949:	The same year (as Gulik's translation of <i>Dee goong an</i>) the communist party now in power bans crime fiction in China.
*1950's:	Gulik writes his first historical Tang crime story <i>The Chinese Maze Murders</i> about judge Di (he changes the Latinized spelling), which is published in Japanese in 1951 and in English in 1957. In 1956 he translates the above mentioned <i>Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree</i> .
*1958:	Jaroslav Průžek translates two detective stories into Czech, one of which has Pao as its main character.
*1964:	The sinologist Leon Comber translates, paraphrases and introduces a number of short stories about judge Pao in his <i>The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao. Chinese Tales of Crime and Detection</i> . He includes six stories from a collection consisting of 72 stories that were also included in the hundred stories discovered by Rosny in 1839.
1967:	A theatre play and a number of chant fables about judge Pao are found in a fifteenth century grave (Idema 2009: xvii, Hanan 1980: 301ff). These texts form the basis of an attempt to create an overview of the distribution of this type of crime fiction in China during the fifteenth century.
*1976:	George A. Hayden translates and introduces three theatre plays about judge Pao in <i>Crime and Punishment in Medieval Chinese Drama. Three Judge Pao Plays</i> .
1976:	Following the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping comes to power. His revisionary politics reopen the potential for Chinese crime fiction that now begins to flourish. Consequently, more translations into western languages – primarily into English and German – appear.

Many interesting observations may be made from this timeline, but it is essential to the historical reconsideration of the description of crime fiction in general that Chinese crime fiction was not only among the world's first crime fiction traditions; it was even introduced to the West before Poe wrote his infamous short stories in the 1840's. Obviously, this does not mean that Poe – as well as his predecessors and successors – would have known about Chinese crime fiction. It is very unlikely that the above mentioned references and translations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gained any particular currency. Generally, we should note that in neither previous nor contemporary research into the literary history of crime fiction has Chinese court case fiction attracted particular attention, though it has been leading a secluded, pristine existence in orientalist and sinological circles. Very few people have tried to disseminate the actual court case stories in translation, and therefore it is presumably not without reason that the famous character Pao has received a certain amount of attention (Rudelsberger 1924, Comber 1964, Hayden 1978, Idema 2009). Robert van Gulik, though, stands as the supreme conveyor of Chinese court case fiction through his translation of *Dee goong an* into English as well as his subsequent sixteen novels about the character judge Di.

Above, we observed a variety of similarities and differences between western and Chinese crime fiction, and the anonymous detective novel *Dee goong an* illustrates these aspects to a great extent. Firstly, a very attentive writer/narrator presents judge Dee while underlining the central message and the socially affirmative disposition of the novel: "In the end, as a general rule, no criminal escapes the laws of the land" (Gulik 1976: 5). The novel assures its readers that justice will prevail, though the writer/narrator stresses that hopefully the novel "will caution the people and thus improve their morals" (Gulik 1976: 7). This moralist and conservative feature is a consistent trait in much Chinese court case fiction (Waltner 1990: 284). By way of the introduction it is made clear that this is a story about detection, justice and improvement of morals. Accordingly, judge Dee is introduced as "a man of exemplary honesty and penetrating wisdom" (Gulik 1976: 7). As a result, the dualistic view of society is emphasized, and hence there is no doubt that by the end Dee will draw the right conclusions. Society and a sense of justice are in that way built into the narrative by way of a relatively admonishing idealism. Here, the absolute ethics of justice come into play, which should undoubtedly be viewed in connection with the fact that the writers of crime fiction were often scholars, lawyers and former judges themselves (Hanan 1980: 318). In this way, traditional Chinese crime fiction has a number of parallels with the western whodunit-tradition, which also leaves the detective personally untouched by the case in question.

It is not necessarily easy to give a preliminary summary of *Dee goong an* as it comprises three separate plots in no contiguity with each other, besides the obvious fact that the same detectives are investigating the case. The novel consists of 30 chapters, each of which is supplied with two lines describing the actions of the particular chapter. Following the introductory sequence, in chapter one we step into the first case, which is a double murder in Dee's district with the title "The Case of the Double Murder at Dawn". In immediate continuation of the first still unsolved case, Dee comes across another case: In chapter four we hear about a man who died under mysterious circumstances, which turns into a case with the title "The Case of the Strange Corpse". In the succeeding chapters, Dee performs two parallel detective efforts, coordinating and investigating the two cases simultaneously, and not until chapter nineteen are we presented with the last case, where a bride has been poisoned during her wedding night – a case hence named "The Case of the Poisoned Bride". This structural composition is a consistent trait of court case fiction where several cases – without being linked together – often make up the complete narrative, which is then also a feature that Gulik brings into his historical novels about judge Dee. In selecting a subject for translation, Gulik chose *Dee goong an*, because it includes a number of closer similarities with western crime fiction: The total number of characters is comparatively low, the development of the plot has elements of suspense, while a fairly small proportion of supernatural devices appear. Nevertheless, the three independent narratives contribute to a considerably different sense of suspense, while Dee is also aided primarily by a useful visit in a Taoist temple, interpretations of dreams and helpful ghosts. Consequently, supernatural powers are indeed present and assist Dee in solving the cases. This applies especially to "The Case of the Strange Corpse" where Dee digs up and communicates with the corpse. Generally, *Dee goong an* then still serves as an illustrative example of traditional court case fiction (for further research into Gulik's novels see Hansen 2011).

The revised history of crime fiction

The question is, then, why it is necessary to draw attention to Chinese court case fiction. The first and most apparent answer is certainly that it is specifically interesting for the history of literature to get a hold on a long-standing tradition of crime fiction in diverse fictional formats, a tradition that has *not* been appreciated in regular discourses about crime fiction. Even though western crime fiction has obvious and palpable roots in western culture, it is not accurate to promote the West or Edgar Allan Poe as the inventor of detective fiction per se. It is highly questionable if Chinese court case fiction was known when Poe launched his short stories about detective Dupin, but it is verifi-

ble that Chinese crime fiction *had been* introduced in the West at that time. Even though the Chinese version of crime fiction has remained undistributed in the West – except among researchers with sinological interest – the genre’s long tradition for writing about crime and detection must be acknowledged and appreciated. In spite of apparent differences, elementary similarities as regards the detection of crime are present in both narrative traditions. Within western crime fiction as well, we find noticeable variations among subgenres that are esteemed parts of the tradition, which is all the more reason to write Chinese court case fiction into this section of literary history.

Another element that western crime fiction has had a hard time dealing with is the genre’s relationship to metaphysics, the supernatural and religion. Poe’s authorship circles around frameworks that – besides the celebrated detective stories – show an interest in the gothic and metaphysical contexts. In spite of a strong belief in rationality, Sherlock Holmes’ creator Doyle was by no means dismissive towards spiritual sensibilities (Kendrick 1999: 103ff). The history of crime fiction shows only a momentary interest in metaphysics and religion (cf. e.g. Spencer 1989 and Paul 1991), but it is not until lately that crime fiction has treated metaphysics and religion widely – probably in recent years exceedingly motivated by the success of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). In Scandinavian crime fiction we see widespread attention towards a reopened relationship between rationality and metaphysics, which is most notably treated in for instance Arne Dahl’s eleven books about the investigation team the A-group (1999-2008) – the books *Many Waters/De störste vatten* (2002) and *Requiem/Dödsmassa* (2004) bear their Christian references in their titles. In German crime fiction, Oliver Bottini’s German novel *Murder in the Sign of Zen/Mord im Zeichen des Zen* (2004) takes this tendency into consideration as well, though the religious reference is here to Zen Buddhism. This trend is also evident in the world famous novels by Henning Mankell, where he opens up a discussion about intangible violence, a type of violence that he designates *the Swedish uneasiness* (Mankell 1999: 9), which is particularly manifest in the short story “Sprickan/The Fracture”, where the detective Wallander experiences abysmal metaphysical horror. This genre tendency – of which the above mentioned titles are but excerpts – may be a cause for wonder in a western tradition of crime fiction and history of modernity, where metaphysics and the supernatural – as we saw in connection with the British Detection Club – have been sidetracked as a subgenre under the term *the metaphysical detective story* (cf. Merivale and Sweeney, ed.). However, if we cast a glance at one of the world’s oldest traditions of crime fiction in China, we realize that the realistic and the supernatural may well co-exist within the work of fiction.

This revitalization of the metaphysical in western crime fiction implies a token for reopening these questions in late modern societies, where metaphysics seem to have regained some significance – a tendency that has been termed post-secularism (cf. McClure 2007). Hence, it is worth noticing that the Chinese crime fiction tradition has commanded this synthesis for more than a millennium. Moreover, in Chinese fiction after the death of Mao we see – in Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg’s frame of reference – a ‘deliberate blurring of borderlines between fantasy and reality’ (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2005: 22). She does not only reckon this a weighting of a certain relationship between the fantastic and the real, because at the same time she offers an explanation in the revival of older genre traditions in China. She mentions for instance the Chinese author Wang Shuo and his novel with the English title *Playing for Thrills* (1989) that draws heavily on hardboiled, American crime fiction, while the author also ‘occasionally weaves tantalizing scraps of fantasy into his narrative’ (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2005: 24). Wedell-Wedellsborg even rounds off with a plausible explanation of why – what she denominates – *haunted fiction* as a modern fantastic allegory appears at the present time:

In China and in the West, the modern fantastic allegory can be read as a reaction to modernity. It is a site of difference, one that privileges the alien, the illusory, and the irrational in contrast to a vision of modernity that subsumes everything under a rubric of ideological homogeneity, rationalism, and materialism. The fantastic inherently recognizes the complexity and unknowability of the modern world. (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2005: 31)

Wedell-Wedellsborg implies in this way a complex image of Chinese as well as western fiction that reflects upon a modern society and a modernity which no longer precludes a moderate relationship with the supernatural, metaphysics and the intangible. This relationship in general and specifically in crime fiction deserves an extended analysis, but in this particular case – with a focus on Chinese court case fiction – it is a new perspective on how a realistic perception of the world can co-exist with an involvement with the metaphysical. In conclusion, a perspective on the historical roots of Chinese crime fiction is then not only relevant for the history of literature in particular, but a more inclusive history of crime fiction may also shed a light on a modern development of a genre that seems to spread like wildfire at the moment.

We may even respond with a satisfactory explanation when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle asks: ‘Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?’ (quoted in Paul 1991: 33). The answer appears to be: ‘it may have been in China’.

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