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‘Looking East and Looking West’: Crime Genre Conventions and Tropes

Karen Seago and Victoria Lei

Crime fiction travels well in translation¹; it offers the reader a ‘convenient mix of the familiar and exotic’² which may explain to some extent the mass appeal the genre has worldwide. This article charts the textual movements, specifically of key tropes of crime fiction, between (primarily Anglophone) Western and Chinese literary systems: moments of production, reception, translation and exchange which contribute to ‘advancing the genre’³ within and across specific cultural and literary contexts. In delineating instances in the evolution of what [Brigid](#) Maher has described as a globalised meta-genre, we draw on a wide range of texts and modes, in itself indicative of the hybrid and constantly evolving nature of the genre: English detective and American crime stories, traditional (Gong An) and modern (Zhen Tan) Chinese crime narratives, translations from English into Chinese and from Chinese into English, as well as contemporary Chinese TV adaptations of Gong An. The focus of discussion is on tracing patterns and developments rather than in-depth analysis of individual texts or translations.

We will start by showing how the impact of Western narrative structures on a weakened literary system generated the Zhen Tan, a new form of detective narrative in Chinese literary production after the key features of the modern Western detective story of ratiocination and suspense were introduced. We explain the movement from domestication to adoption of foreign features in Chinese Sherlock Holmes translations in the context of resident traditions of Chinese Gong An crime narratives and move on

to an exploration of English translations of Gong An, establishing domestication as a translation strategy for narrative structure, but foreignisation in terms of selection of material and the evocation of an exotic, sexualised and feudal other. Finally, we examine two central tropes which emerged in the analysis of English Gong An translations to compare their differing modes of representation in the Chinese and English literary and cultural contexts and consider their development in contemporary modalities of crime narratives: a case study of the representation of female sexuality in Gong An is considered in relation to Western hard boiled crime fiction and then analysed in contemporary Chinese TV adaptations of Gong An; strategies of rationalising and discrediting Chinese supernatural plot devices in English translation are linked back to corresponding moves in distancing the emergent modern Western detective story of ratiocination from its precursors. The supernatural is then traced as a submerged thread in Western detective fiction through sensational literature and paranormal crime fiction as a counter-history and sub-genre to its re-emergence in mainstream Western crime fiction.

Key features of the Western detective story of ratiocination

Arthur Conan Doyle famously described Poe as the 'father of the detective tale'.⁴ ~~and Poe's His 'tales of ratiocination' and especially his creation of Auguste Dupin in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) and his other 'tales of ratiocination' is generally agreed~~ are considered to be both the first embodiment of the modern detective and the inception of a new form of crime fiction.⁵ Poe departs crucially from pre-cursor crime narratives in which crime solving largely depends on coincidence, and the (didactic) focus is on (inevitable) punishment, by placing logical deduction, ratiocination, scientific investigation of the crime and its motives and a rational male detective at the

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centre of the narrative. These features, together with a suspenseful narrative which involves the reader and invites them to follow in the footsteps of the detective attempting to solve the crime on the basis of the clues made available, have long been the orthodox genre conventions of the Western detective story⁶ and they still shape much of crime fiction today.

[Peter](#) Brooks called the detective story the ‘narrative of narratives, its classical structure a laying bare of the structure of all narrative in that it dramatises the role of *sjuzet* and *fabula* and the nature of their relation’.⁷ The relationship of *sjuzet* as the order in which events are presented in the text and *fabula* as the logical order of events in the story captures the central characteristic of the modern detective story: a dual narrative where the crime occurs at the outset and the story is about the detective uncovering the back story, what led to the crime, the criminal’s means, motive and opportunity, that is, the story of the investigation of the crime.⁸ And because the detective story presents a puzzle and its solution, it is also the purest example of what Barthes calls the hermeneutic code: the code of enigmas and answers which are arrived at through partial unveiling, temporary blockage, creating suspense and eventual resolution.⁹

Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (1887) is an instance of the archetypal genius detective who relies on his brilliant mind, logical deduction and scientific investigation to solve crimes. What appears to those around him as an almost uncanny ability to explain the incomprehensible and know the unknowable is insistently presented not as magic or supernatural but as the very bedrock of modernity: [ratiocination](#).¹⁰ ~~ratiocination~~. Holmes consistently draws on all the resources of contemporary developments in investigative and evidence-based science. Conan Doyle writes that, ‘All emotions [. . .] were abhorrent to his cold, precise but

admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen.'¹¹ It is not intuition which drives Holmes's puzzle solving but his powers of observation and ability to interpret minute clues to fit into a larger picture and to construct meaning out of fragmentation, discontinuity and indeterminacy.

However, although structural disorientation, fragmented narrative development and an involved reader as armchair detective are typical of the modern detective tale, they are not present in Western pre-cursor crime narratives and they were absent in the Chinese literary system at the turn of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century when the founding texts of the Western detective genre were translated.¹²

Sherlock Holmes in Chinese translation

In his article 'Sherlock Holmes in China', Zhang Ping argues that the 'introduction and popularisation of British detective stories played a decisive role in introducing new narrative techniques ... and gave rise to modern Chinese detective stories.'¹³ The first translation of four stories by Conan Doyle appeared in four issues of the Current Affairs Newspaper between October 1896 and May 1897. These early translations are particularly interesting in the way they negotiate the conventions of Chinese pre-cursor crime narratives in the receiving Chinese culture and adapt to some of its established central features. There are three traditions of Chinese pre-cursor crime narratives (Gong An): 1) the case stories, which are short courtroom dramas that focus on a Judge or Magistrate, such as Judge Pao and Judge Dee; 2) the hero stories, which are more complex and involve crime narratives that still include a Judge Dee or Judge Pao, but focus more on their lieutenants, the heroes of the title. These episodic stories

revolve around the lieutenants' competitive or supportive relationships. They include action and fight sequences as well as romance, and by the nineteenth century had developed into novels¹⁴; 3) Gong An plays and ballads which were later developed into Opera.¹⁵

While Holmes's 'brilliant investigator' maps easily onto the equally brilliant Judge Dee and Judge Pao, the investigative and narrative *modus operandi* of the Chinese Gong An tradition differ markedly. Holmes' key characteristic, and the defining trait of Western crime fiction, the insistence on the rational, explaining uncanny occurrences by scientific reasoning, is in complete opposition to the way traditional Chinese crime narratives rely on the supernatural and integrate it into the methods of solving a crime. So, for example in the Chinese Judge Pao 'Story of the Stolen Slippers', the ghost of the victim appears to Judge Pao providing detailed information on his murder, and in 'The Key', Judge Pao has a revelatory dream at the same time that a young man is praying to the ghost of his dead father. In the dream, an old man appears holding three straws with writing on them which helps Pao identify the murderer in his subsequent investigation. In contrast to other features of the receiving literary context which were adapted in translation (see below), the rational and evidence-based investigative focus was not changed in translation: exposure to Western models of science, philosophy and government was a central attraction of translated Western texts.

Secondly, narratorial focus in the Gong An tradition is proairetic,¹⁶ rather than hermeneutic. It is not interested in posing a puzzle and providing the answers through twists and turns. Rather, the focus is on actions and their logical relation, leading in a clear sequence to resolution. Similarly to Western pre-cursor crime stories such as *The Newgate Tales*, the narrative purpose is didactic, showing that crime does not pay¹⁷: it

is inevitably found out and punished. As a result, there is very little interest in building up suspense. The early translations of Holmes stories conform to the receiving culture's conventions very clearly in this respect.

In S/Z, Barthes discusses how 'The title [of the story] raises a question'.¹⁸ Titles of Western detective stories generate a similar desire to find out, but, as Hung's study of Holmes translation showed, in 'fifteen of the translations of Holmes stories . . . , the answer to the mystery is given away even before the story begins – through the Chinese titles.'¹⁹ The Chinese titles for the first four translated Holmes stories are particularly obvious suspense spoilers, firmly locating the texts in a tradition of crime narrative which is not focused on the mystery.

English	Chinese ²⁰
The Adventure of the Naval Treaty (1893)	The Investigation of a Case of Stolen Treaty by a British Detective (1896)
The Adventure of the Crooked Man (1893)	Story about a Hunchback Taking Revenge (1896)
A Case of Identity (1891)	A Case about a Stepfather Defrauding his Stepdaughter (1897)
The Adventure of the Final Problem (1893)	Sherlock Holmes Killed while Investigating a Case (1897)

While the English titles are hermeneutic, offering a clue to the story but by no means giving away the twist, the Chinese titles are summarising, explaining the central feature around which the mystery revolves.²¹ This lack of suspense changes

the nature of reader involvement; if the hermeneutic code is less privileged, the reader's attention is not captured and the desire to know what comes next in the narrative is less prominent. An example of a typical plot is the Judge Dee story of 'The Strange Corpse' where Judge Dee identifies the murderer from the very beginning and the focus of the story is on the measures taken to produce the criminal's confession, outlined in a linear and chronological narrative structure. Hung calls this lack of a climactic solution and startling denouement a move from the 'who done it' to a 'how does he do it'²² There are no flashbacks and only occasionally will there be a backstory narrative. Translations reorganise the Western non-chronological composition, aligning sjuzet and fabula so that the description of events in the text follows the order of events as they happen chronologically. In 'The Adventure of the Naval Treaty', a triple-layered narrative is reduced to a single chronological one. The dischronic opening of the English story, where Watson and Holmes receive information about a case in a letter asking for their help, is smoothed into strict narrative chronology through the addition of an extensive biography of the Foreign Office employee Percy Phelps and description of the theft before the letter is sent to Watson. These events are conveyed in a third-person omniscient narration, rather than Watson's first-person narrative perspective.²³

The context of reception: Chinese Gong An

Gong An is an old tradition, traced back to the pre-Qin Period (2100 B.C. – 221B.C.). Both the case stories and the hero stories were originally orally mediated and compiled into print editions between the 16th and 19th century. However, by the late nineteenth century, Gong An case stories were marginalised, partly because the ancient script in which they were written was no longer accessible to the general

reading public and partly because of government intervention. The popular Long Tu Gong An (Cases of Judge Pao) were banned during the Yang Wu Movement (Self-strengthening Movement, 1861-1895) for containing ‘obscene and subversive elements’ and in 1868 topped the list of prohibited books issued by the then governor of Jiangsu Province and key Yang Wu figure, Ding Ri Chang.²⁴

Nevertheless, by the time the first Western detective stories were translated in 1896, they entered a target culture context with established narrative conventions. Translations are facts of the target culture and translation strategies reflect the respective status a genre is perceived to have in the source and target literary systems which determines its systemic position.²⁵ Generally, translations are considered secondary system texts, which means that they tend to conform to the cultural and literary norms of the receiving culture,²⁶ and as we have seen, the early Holmes translations domesticate extensively, using Chinese literary models. However, in certain conditions, translated literature can occupy a primary system position, for example when the receiving literary system is weak, there is a vacuum (for a particular genre) or there is a turning point when established literary models are no longer relevant.²⁷ This is the case at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century when Gong An as a genre was ‘stagnant’,²⁸ constituting a weak literary tradition so secondary system conditions changed to primary system conditions within a short space of time and Western detective fiction in translation became an innovatory force.

From domestication to adoption of the foreign

Between 1896 and 1906, a total of 25 Chinese translations of Sherlock Holmes were published and, as we have seen, these early translations tended to remain close to the conventions of the Gong An tradition in terms of narrative structure and organization.

However, in the context of the period's educational agenda, detective stories contributed to the immense interest in learning about models of equality, social stability and order, scientific knowledge and the idea of democracy and freedom.²⁹

While these new ideas were accepted from the beginning, it took another 15 years for a wide-spread adoption of Western narrative conventions and by the 1920s, translations retained source culture narrative models of suspense, investigative procedures and non-linearity.

A similar development of gradually adopting Western literary conventions marked the creation of Western style detective fiction written by Chinese (professional) authors who were also still strongly influenced by their classical education, and so produced hybrid texts both linguistically (a mixture of classical and vernacular Chinese) and structurally. They demonstrated a marked engagement with and reflection on the values of the traditional Gong An courtroom dramas versus Western style Zhen Tan detective stories. The first Chinese Zhen Tan was published in 1901 by Jian Mang under the title 'Detecting in a Dream' – and while this was a modern Zhen Tan, the title clearly illustrates the remnants of Gong An conventions by referencing the central role of dreams played in the older tradition conveying crucial information through supernatural means. Similarly, one of the most important early Zhen Tan writers, Wu Jian Ren, published his first collection of Zhen Tan stories under the title Detective Cases of China (Zhong Guo Zhen Tan An). The use of Zhen Tan (detective) and an (case) in its title aligns this collection both with the Gong An tradition and the new Zhen Tan mould. While Wu Jian Ren confidently asserted the value of the home-grown tradition, stating, 'Who says that our nation has no detective fiction?',³⁰ even this early work shows some adaptation to new narrative structures by introducing suspense.³¹ The outcome of intense reflection on and engagement with

Western values and conventions can be found in his later work 'A Case of Injustice Costing Nine Lives' (Jiu Ming Qi Yuan), which uses flashback extensively and is the first instance where Chinese fiction uses a non-linear narrative by design rather than by need.³²

Chinese authors took 'a considerable period of time looking East and looking West'³³ but by the 1920s, the new style of detective fiction, Zhen Tan was fully established. While Hung calls the explosion of Western style detective fiction between 1910 and 1920 'Chinese imitations and derivatives'³⁴ according to Ren Xiang this was not a wholesale imposition of the Western model, but a considered appropriation of foreign conventions. Zhen Tan detective fiction offers narrative strategies and content which have invigorated Chinese literature overall but it is still 'deeply rooted in the cultural soil of our own nation'.³⁵

English translations of Gong An

We now turn to how traditional Chinese crime narratives are presented to the Western reader in English translation. In 1949, the sinologist Robert van Gulik published *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*,³⁶ a translation of the first 30 chapters of the *Dee Gong An*,³⁷ a famous collection of Gong An courtroom dramas. In 1964, Leon Comber published *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao, Chinese Tales of Crime and Detection*,³⁸ a translation of six stories from the *Long Tu Gong An* compiled by An Yu Shi.³⁹

In the preface to his English translation of *Judge Dee*, van Gulik provides an introduction to the Gong An tradition and outlines five main differences between Chinese and Western crime narratives. In addition to the lack of puzzle solving, reliance on the supernatural and the didactic focus on punishment which have been

discussed in this paper, Gulik also comments on the excessive interest in detail and overpopulated stories, which counteract expectations of Western narrative economy by introducing features which do not contribute to progressing narrative development.⁴⁰

While he saw a clear need for narrative adaptation, van Gulik nevertheless considered the Judge Dee stories a good introduction of the genre to Western readers because they provide sufficient historical veracity and an authentic Chinese atmosphere. Comber, who translated a selection of Judge Pao stories in 1964, agrees with Gulik on the problematic characteristics of Chinese crime narratives and that they need substantive redaction but he also sees the value of their exotic setting and the opportunity they offer for armchair tourism. The publisher's recommendation of the English edition in 1970 promises that the stories 'transport the reader to a fascinating world of crime and harsh retribution – the violent underside of life in one of history's most intriguing civilisations'.⁴¹

What is interesting here is not only the adaptation of the stories themselves in their translation into English, but perhaps even more so the choice of material for translation and how this constructs a particular view of China. By the time that Gulik and Comber chose Judge Dee and Judge Pao as representative of authentic Chinese crime fiction, this tradition of Gong An case stories was no longer current in the source culture and difficult to access. With the political upheavals in the first half of the twentieth century, very few of the print editions had survived or were catalogued. In addition, from 1949 until the late 1970s there was another period of censorship when the publication of Gong An – condemned as a relic of the corrupt past - was banned on the Chinese mainland further limiting availability.⁴²

Secondly, both Gulik and Comber chose the tradition of Gong An case stories which are less close to Western narrative conventions than the more developed Gong An hero stories. As Gulik's introduction and the publisher's advertisement of Comber's translation indicate, a central feature for the translation of these stories seems to be their exoticism.⁴³ They are not presented as an ancient tradition but as insight into a society which projects a markedly different culture. The translations construct a titillating 'other' which conforms to stereotypes of brutality, torture and unbridled female sexuality: 'The leading female characters seem to have a predilection for jumping into bed at the slightest provocation.'⁴⁴ And while Judge Dee and Judge Pao stories are only available in antiquarian collections in China and are not commonly read, the English translations are regularly reprinted and have a contemporary readership giving the Chinese tradition an afterlife, albeit as the projection of an exotic other.

Both van Gulik and Comber were familiar with crime narratives in the Western tradition and Comber's translation was explicitly conceived with the aim to adapt the stories for the receiving culture. The two tropes which have been adapted most in translation are the representation of femininity and the presence of supernatural plot devices and the following is a contrastive analysis of these tropes in more detail.

The representation of femininity in Gong An and in English translation

While there is some literature on Gong An in general,⁴⁵ there are no studies on the representation of femininity in traditional Chinese crime fiction. The results discussed below are based on the Long Tu Gong An and Dee Gong An respectively.

Women characters in traditional Chinese literature, in which the pre-cursor crime narratives are embedded, can be divided into three groups: women in the domestic sphere (i.e. wives and daughters), courtesans and prostitutes, and warrior women. Contrary to expectations that wives and daughters would be victims and women operating in the public sphere would be perpetrators, in the relevant Gong An texts the majority of female characters, both victims and perpetrators, are wives and daughters.⁴⁶ The vast majority of them are victims of sexually motivated crimes, or secondary victims, related to the victim or the perpetrator. Female perpetrators are without exception an adulterous wife who murders her husband or manipulates her lover into killing him. The latter is also a familiar trope in the Western hard-boiled genre (or noir).⁴⁷ However, unlike the femme fatale in hard-boiled fictions,⁴⁸ who is involved in organized crime or for personal financial gain, in traditional Chinese crime narratives the female perpetrator's motive is exclusively sexual; and unlike the noir femme fatale, their agency is restricted to exercising their sexuality, making sex the means as well as the end of their narrative existence. While the femme fatale is lovable (the investigator falls in love with her and is forced to make a choice between justice and love), in the Gong An, the female perpetrator is ultimately unlovable: the hero does not fall in love with them and their lovers are unattractive anti-heroes, easily ensnared and foolish.

Regardless of whether women are victims or perpetrators, they are described without fail as sex objects with explicit and titillating descriptions of female beauty. They are presented as half-naked and seductive characters whose sexuality is foregrounded. In contrast to the Western dichotomy of the sexually threatening femme fatale and the domesticated, non-threatening wife, sister, mother or daughter, in the Gong An tradition not only the perpetrators but also the victims, are sexually active.

Married women display unrestrained sexual desire, teenage, unmarried women from respectable families such as Virtuous Jade, Plum Blossom and Precious Jade meet their lovers for trysts behind their parents' back and often take the initiative in courtship.

Comber's English translation further increases the sexual dimension, reinforcing female seductiveness and physical beauty at the expense of any other qualities. In the examples, the source text is expanded to between double and triple the length: general terms describing female beauty are replaced by specifications, directing attention to the woman's body, while descriptions of the woman's inner beauty are substituted by specifications of physical attributes. In further additions to the source text, the seductive effect these have are spelled out, and modifiers such as 'charmed', 'enchanted' and 'dazzling' all serve to construct the image of an enchantress.

In the original text of 'The Net of Heaven', the daughter Ah Jiao had 'such beauty that no one could equal'. In his translation, Comber not only establishes an element of competition and comparison by adding that 'it was said that another could not be found to equal her' but also expands the description of the girl, specifying her physical attributes and inviting behaviour, spelling out the effect her beauty has: 'All of the local gallants were much charmed by her enchanting smile and soft plump figure.' Similarly, in 'The Dream of The Goddess of Mercy', Mrs Ting's 'glorious face' becomes an elaborate portrayal of her sexual appeal by enumerating her physical attributes and attractive disposition: 'Mrs Ting had a well-shaped figure with a voluptuous bust and a pleasing personality and melodious voice to enhance it.' In the source text, Mrs Ting is 'well spoken', which in Comber's translation is reduced to the clichéd female virtue of a 'melodious voice', leaving out the meanings of

education and intelligence which ‘well spoken’ also convey. In the translation of ‘The Temple by the River’, the neutral statement that ‘Madam Xie was extremely good looking’ is once more expanded and specified, adding explicitly sexual terms:

‘Madam Hsieh, was a dazzling beauty with a certain voluptuousness about her that made men turn their heads and feel dry about the throat when she passed.’ Again, the sexual effect is spelled out in extensive substitutions and additions. This replaces her ‘coquettish’-ness in the source text with a purely physical effect located in her voluptuous body rather than her behaviour.

The sexual initiative of female characters is also magnified in Comber’s version, in which the young women’s participation in pre-marital sex with the young men they love is turned into active seduction, taking the lead. In ‘The Case of the Passionate Monk’, Comber adds descriptions showing the girl’s eagerness (‘In actual fact, Virtuous Jade did not need much persuasion’ / ‘he found her waiting for him’ / ‘without much more ado’) and planning (‘at the appointed time’). He foregrounds her involvement, again in additions, by specifying the location (‘her room’ and ‘her couch’) and shifts the couple’s shared involvement in the Chinese (‘Hand in hand he and the girl walked into her chamber’) to her as the initiator (‘she led him by the hand’).

In ‘The Net of Heaven’, Comber again introduces impatience and eagerness for a sexual relationship. In the source text, Ah Jiao ‘was virtuous’ which motivates her query why her father is arranging a new match for her even though she is already engaged to a man of her father’s choice as concern over propriety and loyalty. In Comber’s translation, her ‘virtuousness’ becomes impatience: ‘she was somewhat put out and, perhaps – who knows? – being tired of her unmarried state’. Later, in the same story, the mother arranges for her daughter’s fiancé to come and spend the night,

explicitly creating an ‘opportunity’ for them to have a ‘tryst’. Comber shifts this planning and initiative to the girl in an addition to the source text: ‘and Plum Blossom, impatient to see her betrothed, sent a note to him asking him to meet her in the garden after nightfall.’

Even though virtuous women in Gong An demonstrate initiative in choosing a sexual partner, and without exception engage in pre-marital sex, they are (required to be) faithful and loyal. A virtuous woman can have only one sexual partner: if their fiancée or husband is revealed to be immoral or criminal, and they wish to leave him or are left by him, or if they are raped, they commit suicide. There are only very few examples where this is not the case. Madam Loh, wife of Wang Pei, the villain in ‘The Net of Heaven’ is probably the only female character in the Pao Gong An who is permitted life choices familiar to Western readers: a morally grounded separation and re-marriage. This is a minor character in the source text, but Comber significantly develops her role in his translation. Instead of expanding descriptions of her physical beauty as he does with all other female characters, he increases her direct speech to articulate her perspective and moral stance:

I was married to him for less than a year [...] and even after a few months, I somehow knew that the marriage would not last. This affair involving Plum Blossom was the last straw, and I left him to return to my parents. Shortly afterwards he sued for divorce, and I didn’t contest the case, as I was relieved to be rid of him.⁴⁹

The second exception to the rule of suicide is Mrs Ting in ‘The Dream of the Goddess of Mercy’ – a victim of rape. However, in the Chinese text, her decision not to kill herself after the attack is condemned by Judge Pao who accuses her not only of

improper behaviour (accepting her loss of reputation) but also of endangering her husband's life.

You should have killed yourself the day you were abducted. Had you done that, you would have left a good name. Thank goodness the Buddha Guan Yin sent me a dream. Otherwise your husband would have starved to death under the bell because of you.⁵⁰

It is this lack of compassion in the judge which Comber rewrites to present him as an understanding and supportive champion: 'All that has happened to you in the past is now wiped away. You've done nothing dishonourable, and you are free to take up your life again with your husband.'⁵¹

Comparison of representations of female sexuality East and West

Women in the Gong An possess character traits such as decision-making, agency and risk-taking which in Western terms are more often aligned with either negatively coded characters (the villains in the detective story or the femme fatale in hard boiled crime) or are coded as stereotypical masculine gender traits,⁵² but crucially these are exhibited not only by perpetrators but also virtuous women. From the contemporary Western point of view, both virtuous women and perpetrators transgress gender norms, departing from Western 'expectations about what is appropriate behaviour for each sex',⁵³ blurring the trope of the good and bad woman.

Similarly, both perpetrators and virtuous women are sexually assertive, take the initiative and have agency. And for both categories of women, female desire, beauty and sexual agency is disruptive, threatening and potentially destructive. As victims, they fall prey to predators, and bring trouble to their husbands or lovers. In some cases, even the beauty of a faithful wife can be dangerous to her husband. For

example, in 'Suicide by Biting the Tongue', scholar Ke Zhong's excessive sex life with his beautiful wife Shu Zheng causes his premature death. Now widowed, Shu Zheng's beauty incites unwelcome sexual advances by an evil monk and she dies in defence of her honour.

The sexualized female emerges as a trope in both Western and Chinese crime narratives which share the depiction of women as the threatening other: female sexuality and female agency is dangerous.⁵⁴ These women endanger the individual and the social fabric, but in the Chinese tradition the threatening force of female beauty and the desires it engenders are more encompassing than in Western narratives which differentiate between the compliant and more or less submissive 'good woman' and sexual danger of the clearly defined femme fatale who is ultimately destroyed, shown as deviant and destructive. In the Gong An genre, what marks the difference between virtuous women and bad women is not sexual passivity, but loyalty, for which the good woman is willing to lay down her life.

Representations of female sexuality in contemporary TV adaptations of Gong An Gong An stories not only have an afterlife in English translation, but also in contemporary Chinese comic books and Chinese TV adaptations: the immensely successful Taiwan series *Judge Pao* (236 episodes; 1993–1994)⁵⁵ and the Mainland television series *New Judge Pao* (2009)⁵⁶. One of the most popular female characters in the 1993 *Judge Pao* TV series is Bai Xue Mei (White Snow Plum Blossom)⁵⁷ and her character construct is an interesting mixture of tropes from a range of different traditions, both Western and Chinese. She is a heroine in the (Western) revenge tradition, committing murder not out of personal interest but in order to defend the vulnerable: she kills her widowed mother's exploitative and abusive former lovers to

protect her family in the absence of legal remedies. In her role of looking after patients, her costume (a red cape) is reminiscent of a woman warrior. In her role as revenge killer, she deploys the skill set and attributes of the courtesan, wearing a white cape which partially obscures her face and renders her almost invisible against the white snow. She consciously wields her sexuality, seducing her targets and kills them with her hairpin. The traces she leaves behind at each crime scene point to her identity (as a female killer): her hairpin, petals of plum blossom (signifying her name) and her footprints. The warrior woman and the courtesan link her to the hero and ballad Gong An traditions, but the fact that the hero investigator falls in love with her and ultimately has to choose justice (and a death sentence), links to established tropes of the hard boiled.

This narrative closure elicited strong viewer reactions over the two decades that the series has been rebroadcast and viewers' blogs respond to the 'justified criminal' trope of the revenge hero tradition by expressing their sympathy for the character ('Yes, let's weep for Xue Mei, poor Xue Mei. She does not deserve to die. Judge Pao is too cruel! Furthermore, she has only killed those who really deserve to die!') and their admiration and explicit recognition of her as a femme fatale ('What a femme fatale!' / 'Zhan Zhao the hero has finally met his fatal woman!').⁵⁸ Despite evident Western influence on the televised version, in the most popular contemporary Chinese Judge Pao series, the femme fatale does not symbolise evil, but the best qualities of men and women, an extrapolation of the sexually assertive, decision-making female agents of traditional Gong an. Instead of being perceived as destructive and disruptive, Bai Xue Mei's use of her sexuality in enacting her revenge represents the stabilizing force that restores natural justice and order in a world of chaos.

Supernatural plot devices in Chinese TV adaptations of Gong An

However, while the different Chinese television representations of the femme fatale in adaptations of Judge Pao maintained a fairly homogeneous representation of (sexually) assertive female agents typical of Chinese traditional Gong An, the treatment of supernatural elements shows clear differences between mainland and Taiwanese adaptations. The 1993 Taiwan adaptation not only keeps the supernatural entities encountered in the classical print versions of the stories but also adds them to stories that did not originally contain any. Fortune telling, ghosts, dreams, fairies, were-tigers, -foxes, -wolves appear as supernatural beings rather than as impersonations. The 2009 mainland TV adaptation, on the other hand, is closely modelled on Western patterns, focusing on motive, deduction, and investigation and completely erases the supernatural, rationalizes it as impersonations or discredits it as superstitious belief by non-trustworthy women or peasants.

Supernatural plot devices in English translation

Similarly, as regards the adaptation of narrative features in English translations of Chinese Gong an, the supernatural is the one which is most severely changed for the Western readership. Of the six Judge Pao stories Comber translated, only one does not contain any supernatural elements in its original form. The remaining stories contain ghosts, predictive fortune telling and predictive dreams which are instrumental in solving the case, or rather getting the criminal to confess. Only one of these stories maintains the supernatural element in translation– a dream which discloses to Judge Pao the name of the criminal. However, the supernatural is of minor relevance in the source text. The main focus is on investigation, manipulation of accessories and use of

material evidence to achieve a confession – so the case is resolved not through supernatural forces but through investigative procedures already familiar to a Western readership. In his translations of all other source stories, where it is the supernatural rather than investigative and evidence-based logical deduction which is the crucial agent for solving the case, Comber adapts the supernatural elements so that they are explained through rational means – either the supernatural is a device, set up by the Judge to trick the criminal into confession by having his lieutenant impersonate the victim's ghost or the Judges of Hell. Alternatively, the supernatural is presented as a superstitious belief typical of women and peasants and not indulged in by an educated official like Judge Pao: In 'The Dream of the Goddess of Mercy', Comber adds the following explanation: 'Magistrate Pao was not a superstitious man by any means, but he had studied the wisdom contained in the works of Taoist philosophers like Chuang Tzu.'⁵⁹ In the source text of 'The Temple by the River', Judge Pao acts on information gained by supernatural means: the victim's ghost appears to his friend and tells him how he was murdered by his wife's lover – the friend takes this information, or evidence, to Judge Pao who opens a case. In the translation, Pao still hears the friend's suspicions about the murderer but does not take this as evidence to open a case. Instead, Comber provides a substantial addition in which he argues through the validity of bringing the victim's wife to trial on the basis of her proven adultery, rather than trying her for murder on the basis of the ghost story.⁶⁰

From rationalisation to the return of supernatural plot devices

Strategies of rationalisation and discreditation of the supernatural were deployed in early Western detective stories which resolved supernatural occurrences through rational deduction and explanation – one of the most famous instances is, of course,

The Hound of the Baskervilles where the villain utilizes a local myth and exploits it for his own ends. And while the paranormal or metaphysical has been a facet of crime fiction from the beginning, and indeed, there is some argument that Wilkie Collin's *The Moonstone* is one of the first embodiments of the detective story while firmly embedded in the context of the sensational novel, normative definitions of the detective / crime fiction genre have insisted on keeping non-rational variations assigned to sub-genres such as metaphysical or clerical crime fiction.⁶¹

Ascari has traced this counter-history of sensationalist, non-rational crime fiction, but it is striking how there appears to be a return of the supernatural in mainstream crime fiction. This has been a growing trend in the last twenty years, starting with niche products such as anthropological (for example, Hillerman's Navajo detective working in a context which acknowledges native Indian magic, myth and supernatural presences) or hybrid ethnic crime (Burdett's Bangkok detective Jitpleecheep who keeps in close touch with his dead partner), Canadian Ron Weighell's supernatural pastiche *The irregular casebook of Sherlock Holmes* and the current vogue for paranormal crime stories which mix the conventions of crime and dark fantasy. Sarah Pinborough's *Mayhem* crime thriller, for example, is set in London, Paris and Poland in the 1880s, and consciously uses and blends the emerging detective novel of ratiocination with sensationalist and supernatural components by using Jack the Ripper as a subsidiary, and minor human crime narrative, compared to the supernatural water-succubus evil explicitly crafted in analogy to *Dracula*. But it is the move away from purely rational detection in mainstream crime which we find most interesting. Superstition or the supernatural are here 'replaced' by supernormal empathy which allows the investigator to enter the perpetrator's mind or experience the crime scene⁶²; examples include Val McDermid's profiler in *Wire in the Blood*,

Donato Carrisi's drug-enhanced and myth-based investigation of sex crimes in three different time periods in *The Lost Girls of Rome* and Nicki French's psychologist investigator Frieda Klein whose violent ghosts from her past are returning to threaten her in *Tuesday's Gone*. And of course, there is Fred Vargas's hyper-intuitive French commissar Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg who is quite consciously opposed to his rational, methodical and somewhat boring sidekick Adrien Dangelard.

Conclusion

In tracing the development of central tropes and genre conventions of detective or crime fiction, it has become very clear that the perception that it was Western models which generated Chinese crime fiction is too simplistic. The translation of modern English and French stories very clearly had a decisive impact in shaping the genre in China. However, the Western detective story is a response to modernity as is the Chinese detective story, but in the Chinese case, modernity and exposure to Western ideas occurred at the same time and reinforced each other. The Chinese tradition follows a similar trajectory - with a slight delay - to the development of the genre in the West. Both English and Chinese have a tradition of pre-cursor crime narratives which share very similar narrative conventions. They are didactic, focus on punishment rather than suspense and denouement, have a central authority figure upholding the law, are often sensationalist and do not privilege the rational. In translation, whether from the West to the East or from the East to West, dominant conventions have tended to be reinforced, for example the treatment of the supernatural or the focus on suspense. How Chinese and Western authors and producers develop the central tropes of crime fiction shows a more hybrid and far less one-directional development, truly looking East and looking West. Ascari argues that

‘the supernatural plays a central role in postmodern crime fiction’⁶³. However, the function of the supernatural has changed substantially from pre-cursor crime narratives which used it as a means to solve crimes but where the focus was didactic; in the new developments, it is a ‘search for meaning’ how to live life rather than solve death.⁶⁴

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¹ David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 22.

² Brigid Maher, ‘The Mysterious Case of Theory and Practice: Crime Fiction in Collaborative Translation’, in *Crime in Translation*, Special issue *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 22, (forthcoming July 2014) <www.jostrans.org>

³ Maher ‘The Mysterious Case of Theory and Practice’.

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘Preface’, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902).

⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘A study in Scarlet’, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition), p. vi and John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2005), p. 1.

⁶ Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction - supernatural, gothic, sensational* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 6.

⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 24.

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The typology of detective fiction,’ in *The poetics of prose* translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 42-52 (p. 44); Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 2.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang 1974), p.17.

¹⁰ The link between modernity and detective fiction has been clearly established in the literature by, amongst others, Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, and is drawn on by Kim Toft Hansen [Is this from Knowing the unknowable: detecting metaphysics and religion in crime fiction. Detecting Detection: International Perspectives on the Uses of a Plot. ed. / Peter Baker; Deborah Shaller. 1. ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. p. 139-168? YES](#) (2012, p. 150) in his critique of a homogeneous interpretation of crime fiction conventions which exclude the non-rational.

¹¹ Doyle, ‘A Study in Scarlet’, p.2.

¹² Doyle, from 1896; Edgar Allan Poe, 1905 and between 1917 and 1925 various translations of Leblanc’s Arsene Lupin detective series appeared.

¹³ Ping Zhang, ‘Sherlock Holmes in China’, in *Perspectives*, 13:2 (2005), pp. 106-114 (p.106).

¹⁴ Yanbo Huang, *Gong An Xiao Shuo Shi Hua* (A History of Gong An) 3rd edition (Shenyang: Liaoning jiao yu chu ban she, 2000), pp. 87-8.

¹⁵ Gong An opera stories and plotlines are produced today. Hero Gong An stories have been revived in contemporary television adaptations and will be discussed below.

¹⁶ Barthes, *S/Z*, p.18.

¹⁷ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.xi.

¹⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, p.17.

¹⁹ Eva Hung, ‘Giving Texts a Context: Chinese Translations of Classical English Detective Stories 1896-1916’, in *Translation and Creation: Readings of Western Literature in Early Modern China*, edited by David E. Pollard (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1998), pp. 151-176 (p.164).

²⁰ Dechao Li, ‘Translating Sherlock Holmes into Chinese’, Lecture, City University London, June 2012 and Dechao Li and Jing Deng, ‘An Investigation of the Translation Boom of Western Detective Stories in Late Qing (in Chinese), in *Journal of Tianjin Foreign Studies University* (2003) (2), pp. 1-6.

- ²¹ Catalina Iliescu 'What's in a Title? A Cognitive Approach to the Role Played by Translated Text Labels and (Un)adapted Semiotic Elements', in *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 14 (2001), pp. 93-109 (p. 94).
- ²² Hung, 'Giving Texts a Context', p. 164.
- ²³ Hung, 'Giving Texts a Context', p. 161, Li, 'Translating Sherlock Holmes in Chinese'.
- ²⁴ Most cases in the volume are about sexually motivated crimes and involve extramarital sex. In addition the ruling class considered stories originating in the grassroots of the society 'subversive' because they expose corruption and injustice. Li Qi Wang, *Yuan Ming Qing San Dai Jin Hui Xiao Shuo Xi Qu Shi Liao* (Banning of Fictions and Plays in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties: Archival Materials) (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1981), p. 142 and Shu-mei Ding, 'On Ding Richang's Banning of Publications and Plays,' in *Journal of Shaanxi Normal University*, 40:1 (2011), pp.143-149.
- ²⁵ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012), p.18.
- ²⁶ Itamar Even-Zohar, 'The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem,' in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti. (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.192-197 (p. 195).
- ²⁷ ~~Even-Zohar, 'The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem.'~~ pp.193-4. [Full reference needed](#)
- ²⁸ Huang, 'Giving Texts a Context', p. 87.
- ²⁹ Hung, 'Giving Texts a Context', pp. 152, 156; Zhang Ping, 'Sherlock Holmes in China', p.108; Ren Xiang, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance' in *Social Sciences in China* 4, (2011) pp. 205-220 (pp.206-208). Translation by V. Lei. [Full references needed.](#)
- ³⁰ Quoted in Xiang Ren, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance' in *Social Sciences in China* 4, (2011) pp. 205-220 (p. 213). Translation by V. Lei.
- ³¹ ~~Ren Xiang, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance'~~, p. 214. [Need name of publication](#)
- ³² ~~Ren Xiang, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance'~~, p.217. [Need name of publication](#)
- ³³ ~~Ren Xiang, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance'~~, p.213. [Need name of publication](#)
- ³⁴ Hung, 'Giving Texts a Context', p. 159
- ³⁵ ~~Ren, Ren Xiang, 'The Emergence of Detective Fiction in China and Its Significance'~~ [Need name of publication](#) p.214.
- ³⁶ Robert van Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* (Dee Gong An): An Authentic 18C Detective Novel (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1976). Gulik also wrote his own detective stories based on Judge Dee *Judge Dee at work: Eight Chinese Detective Stories* (1967).
- ³⁷ Anon (ca. 1889) *Dee Gong An* (Cases of Judge Dee). <http://www.tianyabook.com/gudian/digongan> (last accessed October 25, 2013). Van Gulik suggests an earlier publication in the 18th Century (Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, p.v).
- ³⁸ Leon Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao: Chinese Tales of Crime and Detection* (London: Panther Books, 1970).
- ³⁹ Yu Shi An, *Long Tu Gong An* (1594) <http://open-lit.com/bookindex.php?gbid=189> (last accessed October 25, 2013).
- ⁴⁰ Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, pp. i-iv.
- ⁴¹ Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*, title page.
- ⁴² Gong An, together with other types of cultural heritage, were condemned as 'relics of the corrupt feudal China' in the People's Republic of China, escalating from 1949 to reach its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). (See for example, Nian Yi Wang, *Da Dong Luan De Nian Dai* (The Age of the Great Turmoil): China from 1949 to 1976 (Beijing: Ren min chu ban she, 1996) and Kim Toft Hansen, 'Chinese Court Case Fiction: A Corrective for the History of Crime Fiction', in *Northern Lights*, 9:1 (2011), pp. 63-77 (p. 65).
- ⁴³ Derogatory stereotypical representations of foreign cultures emphasising difference, often relying on an economy of imperial power dynamics positing the foreign as a negative, imperfect or titillating, sexualised other.
- ⁴⁴ Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*, inside cover page.
- ⁴⁵ Hung, 'Giving Texts a Context'; Li, 'Translating Sherlock Holmes into Chinese', Hansen, [Knowing the unknowable](#), Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*.

⁴⁶ The courtesan, a prominent figure in the popular culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties, is hardly represented in the crime narratives of the period. Warrior women exist in Gong An stories such as the anonymous Shi Gong An (Cases of Judge Shi), Peng Gong An (Cases of Judge Peng) by Yang Yi Dian, San Xia Wu Yi (Three Heroes and Five Gallants) by Shi Yu Kun and Er Nv Ying Xiong Zhuang (Stories of Heroic Men and Women) by Wen Kang, but are completely absent in the two Gong An stories selected for English translation.

⁴⁷ American development of crime fiction which features professional 'Private Eye' detectives. In contrast to Golden Age detective fiction of the closed circle English country house, hard boiled crime is set in an urban environment of corruption and organized crime, depicting graphic violence and sex and often melodramatic romantic entanglements, most typically between the PI and the criminally involved, but sexually alluring, femme fatale. Hard boiled novels have been extensively adapted into and influenced film, a genre known as noir.

⁴⁸ Cf Hale (2007) and Beckman (2012) for the characteristics of the femme fatale in noir.

⁴⁹ Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*, p. 60

⁵⁰ [Comber, The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao](#), Chapter 2. [Full reference needed](#)

⁵¹ Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*, p. 59.

⁵² Cheryl Holt and John Ellis, 'Assessing the Current Validity of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory', in *Sex Roles*, Vol. 39, Nos. 11/12, (1998), pp. 929-941. On-line:

<http://www.ekgp.ugent.be/pages/nl/vragenlijsten/Validity_BEM.pdf> [last accessed October 25, 2013].

⁵³ W. Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1997), p. 325.

⁵⁴ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, pp. 58, 77.

⁵⁵ Chinese Television System; 23rd February 1993 - 18th January 1994.

⁵⁶ Shanghai Vision Max Entertainment; 22nd July 2009 - 6th August 2009.

⁵⁷ 'Judge Pao: Trace the Plum Blossom in the Snow', video and comments,

<http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTM3Mjl5NzYw.html> [last accessed October 25, 2013].

⁵⁸ YOUKU. <http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTM3Mjl5NzYw.html> [last accessed October 25, 2013].

⁵⁹ Comber, *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ [Comber, The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao](#), p. 122. [Full reference needed](#)

⁶¹ Cf SS van Dine's Twenty rules for writing detective stories

<<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0700281h.html#ch17>> [last accessed October 25, 2013] and the Detection Club oath (in James Brabazon, Dorothy L. Sayers: *A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), pp.144-5) which explicitly exclude any supernatural deus ex machina or jiggery-pokery as narrative devices in maintaining suspense or bringing about the denouement.

⁶² Paul (quoted in Hansen, [2012- Knowing the unknowable](#), p. 161) identifies Father Brown as an early incarnation of the identificatory process of crime solving where 'his ability to identify himself with the thought processes that make a criminal perform a criminal action' is the reason for his success at solving crimes.

⁶³ Ascari, *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Ascari, *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction*, p. 12.