

"How Realistic Should It Be?": An Unavoidable Compromise between Reality and Ideality in Judge Dee at Work

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**Abstract**

This article aims to explain main ideas of American realism to non-native speakers of English by largely referring to Robert Van Gulik's work, *Judge Dee at Work: Eight Chinese Detective Stories*, with which many Taiwanese students are familiar and to which they can relate their life experience. The college students are able to have a good grasp of the essence of American realism, "verisimilitude, representativeness, and objectivity," as they read through Judge Dee's detection of crime and struggle against bureaucracy.

Also, in order to enrich students' cultural awareness and bridge the wide gap between the American literary theory and casual reading, this paper cites a couple of forensic case studies from popular TV series, such as CSI: Las Vegas (America) and Judicial Eyes: Black vs. White (Taiwan), and from a work of one prominent forensic scientist, Henry C. Lee's *Famous Crimes Revisited*. By delving into *Judge Dee at Work*, I hope to help students perceive how crime writing reflects the legal status quo, in particular helping them stay in touch with the judicial reality better than ever. In this way, students not only find reading detective fiction entertaining, but also are able to sharpen their mental faculties as well.

Keywords: Detective Fiction, Crime Writing, Realism, Robert Van Gulik, Judge Dee at Work.

As many of us are attracted to the appeal of detective fiction, the collection of Judge Dee's stories, created by Robert Van Gulik, touches the core of a long-buried paradox: is detective writing realistic enough for us to believe it, or should we separate it from social reality or even judicial reality because of its incessant emphasis on "happy endings" which have become the solid ground of closure? (Krutch 45). Videlicet, a big wonder has been brought to light: can detective novels have it all, "realistic-but-ideal?" (Kinkley 59). After detective writing has made some progress on venturing into the literary canon and will hopefully be compatible with "serious fiction," how can crime writers to juggle playing a part in the literary mainstream and suiting the immediate need to boost readership? (Kinkley 56). The answers might vary, for readers could exercise their discretion based on their reading experience. Yet, this paper will address

and untangle the complex enlacement of reality and ideality although almost in the entirety of detective fiction there exists a nonnegotiable dichotomy between right and wrong, good and evil, guilty and innocent, punishment and exoneration.

Maybe at this point of our discussion, it is too early to make pronouncements on the disputable nature of reality and ideality, a heated topic of debate which has posited multiplicity of panorama for a long time.<sup>1</sup> While one looks at this literary dilemma by examples of Robert Van Gulik's writing, one would want to suggest that by referring to a variety of startling resemblance to and conflict with realism, which have been obscure to some extent, but the following paragraphs will unfold, is one "unorthodox" approach to exploring the predicament. To confirm this suggestion, one could turn to *Judge Dee at Work: Eight Chinese Detective Stories* for reassurance. This collection de facto illustrates the underlying principles of realism: "verisimilitude, representativeness, and objectivity" (Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism* 4). All eight short stories in this collection not only cement their hold on middle class readers, but also solidify the realistic framework of "verisimilitude" by touching quasi-illegal issues, based on "some data from old Chinese crime literature" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 174). According to Van Gulik's observation, overall "the [Chinese judicial] system worked well," despite some judicial errors, so all criminal cases are solved, and social order is restored eventually (Van Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* xxiii). As Van Gulik confessed at the end of the novel, "Although the stories told in the present volume are entirely fictional, I utilized some data from old Chinese crime literature, especially a thirteenth-century manual of jurisprudence and detection" (*Judge Dee at Work* 174).<sup>2</sup> Intentionally or not, Van Gulik has recast a heroic figure,

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<sup>1</sup> Critics argue that crime writers struggle to "elevate" their works by melding realism with their writing, and in doing so, they can also satisfy "a growing demand for a semblance of realism" (Kinkley 56 and Priestman 5). By virtue of this literary confluence, authors of this genre hope for undergoing an unprecedented metamorphosis and enhancing their "literary status," so eventually their works will be classified as "serious fiction" (Kinkley 56).

<sup>2</sup> In one way, authors of detective stories quite often brew story plots straight from actual criminal files in order to validate their accounts. In another way, the "obsession with realism" could plausibly delimit "imaginative writing," the literary restraints which have lingered and evolved into "a greater impediment" to composition and could possibly degenerate the incompatibility of realism and crime writing (Kinkley 56-57).

Judge Dee, as a semi-superman role model for law enforcement agents to look up to in a chaotic milieu. When the stories gradually unfold, Judge Dee's objectivity, which mainly remains unswerving in the course of his investigation, brings the final realistic element to light in order to assuage our concerns. Ultimately the realistic qualities not only have become manifest in Judge Dee's stories, but also ensure us that the turbulent society is "morally redeemable," for realistic writing usually yields "an extremely moral fiction" (Anesko 83 and Habegger 110). Presumably in the reader's eyes, the literary interlacement of realism and detective fiction might appear untypical, yet prominent among them captures "the modern spirit by means of which the truth is elicited," though their methods differ to some extent (Perry 683). Indeed, on theoretical grounds, the golden rules of realism and for fabricating detective stories display a literary confluence, via which a peripheral literary genre can very likely merge into the mainstream, although we have to admit that there might be other literary means to upraise detective fiction. Just as realistic novelists base their works mostly on faithful portrayals of social reality without disinteresting their readers, so do crime writers feel swamped by the acute need to raise their literary standing and satisfy the reader's hunger with comparable logical endings.

Starting from the aforementioned premise, the "happy ending" of detective fiction, or in plain English that justice has been fulfilled, seems constitutive, not because it exposes a tug of war between reality and ideality, but because without this closure, some readers probably would regard "reading about crime as morally debilitating" (Krutch 45 and Panek 96). For one thing, detective fiction has long been overlooked by critics and placed over the edge of the sub-literary category due to its recreational mission and the lack of academic merits. It is no wonder that this viewpoint engrafts peculiar enlightenment in the mind of novelists who have tried to "elevate the detective story with the realism" in order to command the prestige of "serious fiction" (Kinkley 56). For another, once shying away from the inherent literary prejudice or "literary insufficiency," the reader will be able to envision the fictional "idealized realism" in which as an "active agent of justice," Judge Dee is delegated to fetch criminals

for sure (Tavernier-Courbin 243 and Kinkley 58). Unlike a passive "armchair detective in an interrogation room," Judge Dee not only "goes in plainclothes to make an inquiry," but also is capable of bringing some closure to every single murder case in this collection (Kinkley 58). Consequently, readers are able to shift their keen disappointment from unsolved homicides, which are meagerly documented in the Chinese crime archives, to the literary gratification drawing from reading Van Gulik's novels (Panek 97). However, setting aside the immediate literary satisfaction, we are fully aware of the dazzling world beyond crime writing as the fictional solution of crimes, with varying degrees of success, often prospers because it "fundamentally is concerned with the bringing of order out of disorder and the restoration of peace after the destructive eruption of murder" (James 13). We meanwhile cannot disregard a momentous social phenomenon in which the sky-high crime rate has become a grim reality and has been fictionalized to a considerable extent. It does not strike us as a little bit strange that the literary adaptation indeed unearths the subtle or perhaps paradoxical compromise between social reality and literary ideality.

The most pressing reason for the "happy ending" is that "denouement" comes into sight, so the average reader to get away from life disappointment via an escalated emotional escape, whose span, to some degree, terminates once the reading is over (Barzun 145). When the nature of this long-neglected literary genre has much bearing on upholding the law, neither can we depreciate its definite contribution, "the literature of escape," which releases many of us from "domestic unhappiness" (Sayers 82).<sup>3</sup> For instance, let us review the last story, "Murder on New Year's Eve" in *Judge Dee at Work*, in which as usual,

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<sup>3</sup> Even though it has augmented readership, detective fiction, regardless of its length, has been underrated as "cheap entertainment" and ostracized from the literary mainstream by pundits (Barzun 144). Owing to this type of depreciation, the primary function of crime writing, as it is firmly believed, can "satisfy only a juvenile and unliterary taste" (Barzun 144). Or wrapping up its long-disdained literary contribution in Franco Moretti's caustic comments, we take notes that "Detective fiction owes its success to the fact that it teaches nothing," though this genre appeals to the masses because it enables them to "find reassurance, to have their formal and ideological expectations confirmed" (Moretti 138 and Chernaik 104).

Judge Dee spends time demystifying a homicide. The tension accelerates as some hard evidence, such as some "wet bloodstain" on a chopper and "bloody footprints," turns up, so a "rascal" is under arrest (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 166-168). The essence of tension-building ramifies in a nontraditional direction and piques our literary curiosity so as to shock us at the end, for no homicides have actually occurred after all. Accordingly, there is no criminal to be nailed and no arrest to be made. This short story, on the contrary, supplies a "once in a lifetime" opportunity for us to pick upon the fact that occasionally Judge Dee slips in his judgment. As opposed to a typical demonstration of Judge Dee's professional expertise in criminal justice, this short story ultimately secures a satisfactory settlement of a couple's domestic quarrel, and then its "happy ending" makes up for Judge Dee's rare and overdone deduction. While it is pretty difficult for readers to discard the complacency deriving from watching Judge Dee solving knotty problems, this short story slows down their emotional momentum and answers a special calling to balance realistic modesty against somewhat exaggerations of Judge Dee's invincibility. En bloc, his blunder does not stop readers from liking him because the realistic rendering of the story enacts to reveal Judge Dee's down-to-earth disposition, in lieu of totally immersing him "in a vacuum of fictionality" and granting him immunity from any human errors such as the inefficient legal system and bureaucratic resistance to his investigation (Ammons 97).<sup>4</sup> Put simply, Judge Dee's trifling slip in reasoning closely dovetails with the humanitarian remission of realism: "to err is human, and to forgive oneself is also human" (Levenson 165). We are not sure how embarrassed Judge Dee might think himself afterwards whenever he recalls his misjudgment, whereas his forensic assessment, while admittedly brash and rushed to draw a conclusion, seems to have an overwhelming sense of accountability built into it. Not only does the happy closure wink at Judge Dee's excessive sense of responsibility, but it also transports us back to

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that in the long run, as an investigator and an impartial judge, Judge Dee is capable of multi-tasking. Neither extorting material benefits from crime-solving nor bearing a great fame for it fulfills his ambition. Instead, he wages a merciless war on political corruptionists, bribe-taking government officials, and the hierarchical military networks in order to dispense justice when the Manchu dynasty has been in civil disorder already.

societal reality in which sometimes an overriding sleuth hero, akin to ordinary human beings, makes faux pas.

In addition to the controversial issue associated with reality and ideality, this paper also delve into the subject of coincidence. Attendant on the concept: "Crime is attractive but incidental," coincidence, though it might be a compelling but problematic literary device, may be worth noting because it not only saves detectives the time of snooping around for clues, but also widens the chance of busting convicts (Barzun 144). On the bright side, in rejecting legal technicalities, coincidence plays a role of inspiration which enables law enforcement agents and detectives to put their capability for the wisest possible use when they apparently reach the relentless deadlock after an exhaustive investigation. Regardless of their absolute commitment to justice, law enforcement agents, by any means, cannot build a murder case solely upon coincidence to register the determination of guilt and innocence in their encounter with extremely unfathomable criminal cases. In this view, the excess of coincidence will mercilessly expose "a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity" of law enforcement (Ammons 97). Since the insertion of coincidence could be "anxious and contradictory" to the judicial system or even discredits law enforcement altogether, novelists often exercise restraint and moderation in using coincidence to a desired effect only to lighten the burden of investigators, simultaneously raise their unremitting endeavor a notch or two, and camouflage their helplessness as well in the furtive assistance to detection (Ammons 97).<sup>5</sup>

One of the things to be observed about the function of coincidence is that it fascinates the writers, detectives, and readers even before

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<sup>5</sup> In "Murder on New Year's Eve," after the team takes up an investigation, Judge Dee, during his routine shore patrol, bumps into a suicidal woman who later provides important investigative leads in one criminal case. He stops the woman from jumping off the bridge at an opportune moment when he cautions her: "Killing yourself won't bring the dead back to life" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 168). A case like this not only plays Judge Dee's hunch well, but also links his coincidental discovery to exposure of the truth. Nevertheless, Van Gulik did not go overboard with coincidence in an effort to abase the investigative committee. That Judge Dee comes to rescue with perfect timing and saves her life helps solve a bizarre crime, for the woman gets the fact straight that her husband (the prime suspect) does not slay her despite their furious quarrel.

forensics was introduced as the 19th century turned.<sup>6</sup> Coincidence has become an enigmatic *deus ex machina* to indict convicts and enact justice though it is not rated as "the sole and logical medium for detection of crime" (Panek 81 and McFarlane 2). The concept of coincidence foregrounds that "the natural explanation is not much more convincing than the supernatural one," so coincidence is truly a heterogeneous variation in method of getting detectives or the investigative committee off the hook after they have racked their brains. As the clueless or misled law enforcement agents are stuck in some aberrant criminal cases, after a thorough fact-finding process, coincidence, by easy extension, turns into the most supernatural way to haul them out of the wrong track and fulfill their vocational obligation to exonerate the innocent and capture the guilty. In all likelihood, coincidence plays a significant role in Judge Dee's career when his efforts offer no hard, no fast, and no ultimate answer to an ongoing investigation.<sup>7</sup> By degrees, the majority of readers get restive toward the end of each story, and presumably waiting in anxious suspense for a definite closure, too, drives them to desperation. True enough, often

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<sup>6</sup> In support of forensics, scientific accuracy is not the only issue involved in nabbing any law breakers. Generally speaking, pressure for detecting crimes not only steadily piles on, but also ultimately mounts up, so law enforcement agents have to bust the culprits as soon as possible. Altogether, the investigators are weighed down by the immediate public alarm, the media's insatiable curiosity, and urgent requests from families of the victims. In order to shun warped judgments, police detectives or investigators choose to revisit the crime scenes, re-process the collected evidence, and pursue all possibilities. When "a range of appropriate scientific and logical hypotheses" gets confuted, and neither do their "instincts and powers of observation" help that much, many of them candidly admit having kept an open mind to any probable clues, even enigmatic hints with a dreamlike quality (Lee, *Cracking More Cases* 268). Hence a supernatural coincidence, outside the spectrum of their past experience and scientific expertise, can be counted as a valuable lead so long as it enlightens the trained professionals in a flash of inspiration and revives a flicker of hope to put offenders behind bars. The former sheriff, Cheun-Dai Tsai, in the Chia-Yi First Precinct, (蔡政達, 嘉義第一分局前分局長) is pretty acute in gauging the function of coincidences. He explicates that the more coincidences occur, the more likely criminal cases get resolved (巧合出現越多, 破案機率就越高) though his remarks do not mean to distort the public's perception of forensics in legal proceedings (ETTV, 東森電視臺, Taipei, 23 July 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In a close reading of the novel, we cannot help but fasten our attention on an inexplicable coincidence which inspires Judge Dee to re-evaluate an almost closed murder case. In "The Red Tape Murder," Judge Dee keeps getting a wrong military file, "Personnel 404," whereas "Purchase 404" is what Judge Dee has demanded to review (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 33). Coupled with recurrent administrative errors, an inner calling gets Judge Dee curious about an assassination on a military base, so he decides to chase potential suspects and finally busts the real killer.

readers act out their unbridled zeal for crime fiction by putting forward a plea for some closure. Perhaps, in one way or another, coincidence responds to a call for crime abatement as it is frequently taken by critics as "a metaphorical use of" reality, a literary compromise or scientific concession so to speak, to bridge the gap widely left by human incompetence (Ammons 103).

The tug of war between reality and ideality has not come to an end when we cast our eyes over another disputable feature of detective writing, spiritualism, by an illustrative phrasing, which alludes to vital clues divulged by "supposedly supernatural means" (Willis 65). Similar to coincidence, supernatural powers have evoked a great amount of harsh criticism for its lack of "logic," "hard facts," and "scientific explanations" (Willis 60).<sup>8</sup> For a quick glimpse of the literary obsession with logical adduction, we could juxtapose the scientific preciseness with what critics often identify as a basal drawback of realism: "One of the serious flaws in many accounts of realism is an extreme emphasis on its rationalistic or scientific component -- determinism, environment, heredity" (Habegger 107). No doubt, this perspective poses a provocative challenge to the profound doctrine of crime writing and realism as well, both of which have honored a firm commitment to scientific conciseness. In spite of public distrust of the supernatural occurrence, there has been a call for re-evaluation in recognition of its contribution: "Spiritualism, on the other hand, involves suspension of logical faculties to believe in events and phenomena which cannot be explained in scientific or logical terms" since the mid-nineteenth century (Willis 60). To discharge its mission, spiritualism often tilts the balance in favor of detectives, especially when

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<sup>8</sup> It does not catch us by surprise that spiritualism often takes on the taciturn and inscrutable variety of forms, since "the Chinese have an innate love for the supernatural. Ghosts and goblins roam about freely in most Chinese detective stories; animals and kitchen utensils deliver testimony in court" according to Robert Van Gulik (*Van Gulik, Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* II-III). To many Chinese readers, not only law enforcement agents, but also the legal system is fallible, so things easily go wrong in the course of investigation due to "the bumbling police detectives, the misinterpreted clue," and a dysfunctional judicial system (Panek 49). Spiritualism frequently makes a prompt appearance in a whole myriad of ways and has run deep in Chinese detective stories even though placing full reliance on the supernatural to set things right also contradicts "our principle that a detective novel should be as realistic as possible" (Van Gulik, *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* III).

they are completely at a loss or injudicious. As Chris Willis further clarifies, "The ability to make the dead communicate in a more reliable way would no doubt be a great advantage for a detective" even though in order to make a seamless transition, the message sent via supernatural mediums, which sometimes may be the human incarnate, is "so loosely worded as to fit almost any contingency" (60 and 67).<sup>9</sup> Or perhaps we could recapitulate Willis's synopsis in modern terms so that without difficulty, we could get to the core of the matter. By some means, spiritualism "speaks up for the dead, so whoever is alive can make things right for the victim" (*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, CBS, New York, 07 August 2008). Likewise, never does the unsuperstitious Judge Dee resort nor bear allegiance to supernatural powers or séances once he takes over pending cases of murder. For some unknown reason, at any rate, the spirit of one victim repeatedly appears in Judge Dee's garden and finally arouses his suspicions in "The Two Beggars."<sup>10</sup> Judge Dee, granted,

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<sup>9</sup> For starters, Conan Doyle threw spiritualism into question, but later went through a "full conversion to spiritualism" during World War I, and eventually applied it to his writing (Willis 61). Chris Willis claims that as a "literary convert," Donan Doyle symbolizes "the best-known link between spiritualism and detective fiction" although the young Conan Doyle sneered at this irrational device and mocked it: "the greatest nonsense upon earth" (Doyle, *The New Revelation* 19). There is a definite indication in his biography that attending séances with friends got Doyle to do further research on supernatural powers. From Conan Doyle's point of view, spiritualism, similar to detective writing, "presents a problem to be solved" (Willis 61, and Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* 102).

<sup>10</sup> The omniscience of supernatural powers dictates the plot development in "The Two Beggars." A male ghost constantly appears in Judge Dee's household. "Silently he limped across the hall, supporting himself on a crooked staff. He didn't seem to notice the judge, but went straight past with bent head" as the storyteller recounts (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 96). Having seen the silent ghost wandering around strikes the Judge with "sudden horror" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 97). Playing his hunch, Judge Dee keeps it secret that something is off and looks suspicious to him. Late in the novel, the narrative voice unravels an indissoluble connection between the male ghost and a slain male beggar found on the street.

In "The Night of The Tiger," Judge Dee again catches a glimpse of an apparition which drops a helpful hint about a young dead girl of a heart attack. The way the family mourns her death looks fishy to Judge Dee because he has a gut instinct that there is more to cause her demise. He initiates the investigation right away although the flood accidentally separates him from his assistants (Van Gulik, *The Monkey and The Tiger* 73).

Throughout his political career, never does Judge Dee give unswerving allegiance to supernatural powers or séances, for he is not a "supernatural detective," and nor does he bust convicts totally "via a human intermediary" (Willis 67). In some criminal cases, he can bluff his way through interrogations and frighten suspects into telling the truth after the supernatural insinuation has fuelled intense speculation. Judge Dee is described "bark[ing]" at one of the suspects and shifts gears in the middle of detection based on this

constantly broods over the sight of the ghost during the investigation, follows the leads, collects criminating evidence, and eventually has the female murderer suspect arrested. As the narrative voice describes, "the judge remained standing there, looking down at the dead man whose ghost he had seen passing through the hall" (Van Gulik, *Judge at Work* 100). This crucial episode enables us to excogitate the possible coexistence of scientific infallibility, such as Judge Dee's crime scene reconstruction and crime mapping, with the noninterventional aid of spiritualism to give him a heads-up.

To name some occasions of supernatural powers besides adds mysterious tints to detective writing, whereas too many citations of spiritualism very likely create an "atmosphere of tolerance" in which we are expected to put up with human ineptitude (Willis 69).<sup>11</sup> There has been a flat-out fixation about science; as a result, many detective story writers base their narratives on real scientific facts in order to render their stories authentic. Nevertheless, by virtue of toning down the enthusiasm for science, supernatural allusions help to justify the indecipherable incidents, soften the reader's disappointment, and exhibit some hopeful signs in the uncertainty, when occasionally science and injustice darken their expectancy into moral anxiety and enhance their moral bewilderment. A retrospective glance at the pinnacle of spiritualism in the 1930s hits upon the fact that supernatural powers, in the disguise of either animate or inanimate objects, essentially are a sidekick to science in the investigation of criminal cases. Hardly do crime writers carry spiritualism to extremes or empower it to steal the "thunder" of science or justice because after all the

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"medium's authenticity" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 107 and Willis 63). As noted above, just as Van Gulik portrayed Judge Dee in the best possible light and endowed him with a natural gift for rendering justice, so supernatural powers cannot overpower Judge Dee who instead follows up supernatural hints "to good effect to frighten a suspect into confessing" in addition to utilizing all instinctive knowledge (Willis 60).

<sup>11</sup> Unlike an "atmosphere of tolerance," the insertion of a quasi-spiritual figure, Sam Constant, in Henry Lee's *Famous Crimes Revisited*, adds a literary dimension to supernatural powers. On the one hand, "Constant" involves a connotation of "eternity, constancy, and permanency," which essentially catches the essential spirit of legality (永恒、不變、永久存在) (Lee 6). The creation of Sam Constant, on the other hand, hits a medium for smoothing storytelling because Constant's role vacillates between a listener and a narrator instead of serving as a "human intermediary" to let fall hints, to speak up for the victims, or to dispatch investigations (Willis 67).

final determination of guilt or innocence has to wait for concrete evidence and legal confirmation.

In practice, situated within the conflux of realism and detective writing, the role which supernatural powers assume, to many novelists, is not tremendously different from a detective's call of duty because they both have "mediumistic qualities" (Willis 60). On a sophisticated level, spiritualism bespeaks avuncular, knightly, or even paternal qualities which a genius sleuth could possibly possess. With regard to the latter, a detective, in return, proffers supernatural powers a fair degree of legality or in other words puts spiritualism on the literary map. In point of fact, it is a widely held view that spiritualism is auxiliary to detection of crime. The synthesis of spiritualism and crime writing retains a crucial importance for us because we can furthermore advance a literary "melting-pot" theory which capacitates us to picture a special partnership between "suspension of logical faculties" and "a literature of logic" (Willis 60). That is going to suggest that crime writing, which has exceeded the known rules, promptly hits on atypical solutions when the retrieved evidence or eyewitness accounts cannot afford any promising clues. What is so distinctive about detective fiction is that it does not consistently pursue scientific certainty but pivots on unraveling murder mysteries and achieving some closure from time to time. Pairing up with spiritualism, detective fiction, in a broad sense, communicates the knowledge of the indefinable to the reader. The linkage of detection with supernatural powers stresses the fact that crime writing contains a great range of solutions, which may flatly contradict sound scientific ratiocination. It is fair and indeed important that following up supernatural hints often shows great adaptability of detectives for any investigative leads. This stress above all places upon some obscure circumstances in which human missteps or inevitable errors might creep in and accidentally mess up any crime detection in any suitable fashion. Given a frank look, supernatural mediums and detectives should not be distinctly exclusive, but rather assert their idiosyncrasies "in a mutually supportive fashion" in order to "explain mysteries" and "reveal a truth"

(Ammons 112, Crowley 11, and Willis 60).<sup>12</sup> Despite of the fact that so much of our passion has been stirred by this literary mixture, we should not raise our hopes too much by any means, since deeply immersing ourselves in this cheery literary optimism will blind us to a very marked degree. More often, however, spiritualism harbors an abstract "notion of method supplementing" which cannot entirely replace the intelligence of the hero sleuth or limit "the fair use of evidence" (Panek 54). On the darkest interpretation, when it comes to the practicability of economy, nor will the amalgam of spiritualism and scientific detection always measure up to the fierce competition in publishing and guarantee a flood of book-selling in the free market.

If we shift our attention from interest in supernatural powers to fascination with one broad and enduring appeal of Robert Van Gulik's works, we cannot avoid exploring this marked feature from a historical prospective. Just as spiritualism produces eccentric scenarios and ensures intangible but successful results, so the resurrection of Judge Dee in an anarchic and subversive era looks abstruse. At any rate, the stark contrast between a mighty empire (the Tang dynasty) and a moribund government (the Manchu tyranny) certainly suggests that Judge Dee's fictional reappearance holds out an explicit promise of justice waiting to be administered. Without hampering the progress of the stories, Van Gulik turned back time and recast his character in distinct ancient dimensions symbolically in need of moral rectitude. Following similar moral trajectories, the reemergence of this hero detective, in a figurative sense, parodies the growing concern of a realistic novelist who "tries to hold together what he recognizes quite well is falling apart" (Bersani 60-61). Or else in the most exact terms possible with realism, Habegger notes, "Realism was an analysis of quiet desperation" due to which realists have

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<sup>12</sup> It is worthy of our attention that "mixing spiritualism and detective fiction is not necessarily successful" (Willis 72). "Making the dead speak" is the common goal for which spiritualism and detection have fought. Along with the mutuality, their diametrical opposition is the well-known "mundane reality" which fiction writers struggle to reconcile (Panek 138). On top of the "fundamental optimism" achieved by a subtle combination of spiritualism and detection, supernatural powers, as a cryptic clue, drag us back to reality and deepen our conviction that "the universe is full of more mysteries" than one detective, even a master sleuth, can fathom (54).

put all possible efforts into defragmentation (Habegger 106). The majority of realists retain an absolute belief that the "chaotic fragments are somehow socially viable and morally redeemable," and ultimately "order is restored" (Bersani 60 and Chernaik 104). Symbolic of the realistic essence, Judge Dee keeps silent about social instability and injustice most of the time, but his detection of crime has plenty of appeal to realists and to those who like to work out puzzles.

Aside from Judge Dee's subtle ways of wrapping up criminal matters, much enthusiasm for Judge Dee's real identity, in any number of ways, places us in a time capsule when we do a background check and figure out that Judge Dee was a historical magistrate, whose existence was unquestionable, (from A.D. 630 to 700) in the Tang dynasty (approximately from A.D. 618 to 907) based on the Chinese chronicle. A quick retrospective glance over the Chinese history tells us that Robert Van Gulik only relocated the fictional Judge Dee in the Manchu dynasty (from 1368 to 1644), a chaotic epoch, also the last Chinese empire, without reconstructing his identity or securing him a higher post than he actually obtained within the Chinese political hierarchy. Why Van Gulik adjusted Judge Dee's historical background, beyond temporal and spatial limits, seems very puzzling, for he never explicated this subtle alteration to the reading public. There may be several explanations for Judge Dee's spatial and temporal resettlement, which probably have outnumbered Van Gulik's underlying motive for this transhistorical mode of slipping over all spatio-temporal borders. One potential conjecture immediately springs to our mind that in aggregate, crime rates hit its record high in the Manchu dynasty which also struggled to counterattack the armed intrusion on the border, "the Tartar hordes on the western frontier" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* ix).<sup>13</sup> In this light, social bedlam has morphed into a legal problem, so the fictional portrayal of Judge Dee generates a vortex of forces to quiet

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<sup>13</sup> All of this more than implies that some critics, Charlotte Furth and Jeffery Kinkley for instance, decide to cut the actualities of history some slack rather than closely scrutinizing Van Gulik's literary merits or faults. Stretching our imagination can very likely replace a rigid scrutiny into the unfathomable when the storyteller does not go into detail about Judge Dee's background. As a result, Furth's conclusion removes our doubt as he explains, "the Judge Dee narratives are casual about the details of historical time and place, while deeply informed by an imaginative vision of a historical world" (77).

the social disorder. As a well-known Chinese adage goes, "Chaos produces heroes" [時勢造英雄]. Practically speaking, beneath the hard core of Judge Dee's mission lies his endeavor to deliver definite help and achieve justice, which is far more formidable and stressful than the lifework that crime writing would entrust to a conventional detective.

Since there is no way of accurately deciphering Van Gulik's transhistorical motion, it could be feasible that our literary elaboration takes shape in his uncomplicated plan simply to situate readers in "the more immediate historical present" (Lehan 48). More or less, Judge Dee, who can pass for a super "master-detective" and a fair judge in the Chinese culture, makes sure that justice is properly meted out amid turbulent and unstable social conditions (Panek 50). While the Manchu dynasty bears the marks of human warped natures and evil deeds, in juxtaposition, Judge Dee's increased role in detection, though to a considerable degree, it is rigorously deterred by the high levels of political intervention, effects a happy outcome of fiction. Along with the competent Judge Dee, Van Gulik's unconventional play of history, on a large sociological scale, has morphed our casual reading into ruminations on a cross-cultural masterwork. That Van Gulik suffused his fiction with the bustling coastal towns of China sends a direct challenge to this detective genius as we witness how Judge Dee manages to remain ethical in a maze of bureaucracy. Aided by the spatio-temporal journey, Van Gulik breathed new life into a realistic platitude so that he could capture the "generation's disillusionment with oppositional politics and their disbelief in the efficacy of human agency" (Anesko 80). On the one hand, in addition to embodying the chief attributes of realism, Van Gulik's vivid depictions of the dismaying Manchu society and Judge Dee's assiduity in his duties moreover convince us that justice would not be exactly achieved with any other historical setting. Van Gulik, after stretching the reader's possible tunnel vision of detective fiction, on the other hand, perhaps aimed to outline a realistic blueprint for an "alternative culture" or "alternative

societies" to replace the disintegrating Manchu dynasty while beholding the collapse of the last Chinese empire (Anesko 80, Pizer 15).<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the fact that Van Gulik practiced literary virtuosity and innovation in the swift passage of time, Judge Dee's legal intrigues do not extricate him from "bureaucratic hindrances" (Kinkley 53). Instead, he, in his encounter with extreme criminality and large-scale martial events, meets many bureaucratic obstructions of justice. Then, too, it is without a doubt that being stationed in "a remote district on the north-east coast of the Chinese Empire" sometimes shields Judge Dee from the bureaucratic central government in Beijing. Yet at any rate, endowing him with any further exclusive privileges would seem just too good to be true (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 1). Or, more precisely, the flux of judicial instability, which contains factors of human recklessness, perjury, unreliable witnesses, contamination of the seized evidence, the lack of compelling physical evidence, or even bribery of public officials, has made Judge Dee's detection of crime more troublesome than ever. Follow we do as readers, fortunate that we extrapolate from the plots, "bureaucratic hindrances," which outshine other sorts of impediments to the process of investigation, coerce Judge Dee into bowing to political pressure and reaching an inevitable compromise (Kinkley 53). In the juxtaposition of Judge Dee's total commitment to justice, the narrative voice yields to harsh

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<sup>14</sup> If we run a reality check on Judge Dee's stories, on some level, the end justifies the means. In actuality, the efforts which Judge Dee and his assistants have put into solving crimes are crowned with ultimate success, the apprehension of criminals. Into the bargain, Van Gulik's novels focus on seeking justice for victims in a dysfunctional society. Apart from serving as literary or societal conundrums, detective fiction frequently trots out one cliché, "no hurt, no foul (no crime, no punishment)," which has become emphatically engraved on the mind of reading public and also evident in Van Gulik's works (Panek 42). However, an inclination is apparent to us that Van Gulik did not aim to foster the idea of "retributive justice" (Panek 42). A recurrent theme looms rather large in Van Gulik's fiction to illustrate a delicate relationship between a competent judge and a crumbling empire; otherwise, who would need a respectable hero judge to defend victims in a world at peace?

To accurately perceive an aura of disarray, let us make a cross-cultural connection between Van Gulik's classical detective novels and some current American TV series, such as CSI: Las Vegas, CSI: New York, CSI: Miami, and The Defenders. Keep in mind that our comparison and contrast transcend racial and historical boundaries as all the crime scenes are located in various sin cities in the United States of America. Granted, in the absence of an idiosyncratic judge, the American TV shows are not only intently attentive to scientific accuracy and to giving investigators credentials as well-trained forensic scientists, but also mirror a microcosm of human atrocities.

martial reality: "With the fate of our Empire in the balance, you dare to bother me, with the life of one wretched man?" when the military Marshal flatly refuses to prioritize a local homicide (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 159).<sup>15</sup> The Marshal's blunt rejection gets down to a vivid touch of reality that Judge Dee has an uphill task of fulfilling justice which is highly vulnerable to ancient power politics within a large social context. As a result, while enmeshed in overwhelming bureaucratic odds, no longer is Judge Dee capable of solving quite a peculiar crime on his own in a dying dynasty. After a domestic murder case brings Judge Dee into conflict with the military, a powerful centralized bureaucracy immediately spawns whatever amounts to a sophisticated political barrier to crime detection.

Attendant on the bureaucratic meddling comes Judge Dee's flexibility of a hard-working investigator who hides his distaste for bureaucracy but does whatever it takes to deal with political corruption so long as he is allowed to reopen an investigation and secure a conviction. For instance, in "The Coffins of the Emperor," Judge Dee lowers himself and exercises due courtesy toward the Marshal in order to make a humble request for re-investigating a sealed murder case. From a high sense of responsibility to his entire submission to the domineering martial system, Judge Dee bends to the Marshal and slips into deference. As the storyteller enables us to picture his obedience to the superior, "He [Judge Dee] stepped up to the Marshal and asked *diffidently*: 'May I take the liberty of asking you a favour, sir? . . . I would like you to review a case against a captain, sir. He's going to be beheaded at dawn, but he is innocent'" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 159 and italics mine). The swollen bureaucracy, to an alarming degree, invariably procrastinates in enacting justice, though the murderer gets convicted at the end. With little success do Judge Dee and police forces fight against the bureaucratic

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<sup>15</sup> The ancient Marshal in Van Gulik's novel bears a remarkable parallel to one fictional character, Conrad Ecklie, in *CSI: Las Vegas*, since they both are old school bureaucrats. In the TV series, Ecklie, an Undersheriff of the Clark County Sheriff's Department, is a perfect foil to Gil Grissom, a widely acclaimed forensic scientist. Unlike Gil Grissom who performs all of the duties of an investigator and of a team leader, Ecklie, knowing nothing scientific in his bones, is an ultimate fawning sycophant who pursues a political career with great determination. Ecklie plays his cards well to get a promotion, whereas Gil Grissom, a full-fledged criminologist except for the lack of political skills, often has to reason things out with Ecklie and plays second fiddle to him in a bureaucratic department.

hindrance, since it has been thick on the ground for centuries. While we attest that Judge Dee skirts around the government bureaucracy in order to read over the criminal files on homicides again, re-arrest suspects, or move them from precinct to precinct to duck bureaucratic rulings on suspects' rights, his diligence accidentally discloses the manifold layers of bureaucratic intervention which has run deep in the criminal justice system.

In addition to Judge Dee's struggle to beat a bureaucratic social system, how he launches a full-scale investigation defines the characteristics of Van Gulik's fiction: is it an "infant detective story," or does it heat up our literary enthusiasm for "hard-boiled" detective fiction? (Panek 144). The following key clues will guide us to the puzzle. Incontestably, not only Judge Dee's earnest devotion to each murder case, but also his capability of remaining unprejudiced and analytical arouses the admiration of the reading public. Notwithstanding, the intensity of our interest, from time to time, might flag to a certain degree. From a judicial point of view, sometimes we catch Judge Dee off his "legal" guard when we mark off within the context of his detection and interrogation and find him falling below the threshold of the standard protocols.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the mass of readers should severely censure Judge Dee for his approach to cracking criminal cases and interviewing suspects because we also have to take account of his ancient background, in which neither dusting murder weapons for fingerprints, scientifically analyzing possible evidentiary items, reconstructing the premises of any crime scenes, nor establishing a national DNA database was available. Compared with the advanced appliances of forensics prevalent in modern crime fiction, which

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<sup>16</sup> The way Judge Dee conducts interrogations is not totally free of criticism. As ordinary people who sometimes get emotionally attached to victims and swayed by irrational prejudice against potential suspects, Judge Dee is not able to totally cast aside his bigotry in the process of investigation (Felman 260). For example, Judge Dee and his assistants use what is called the "third-degree" method which attempts to "confront a suspect with his crime hoping he will flush or lose color, gasp, or stammer" (Balmer 2). In all likelihood, this type of extralegal recourse, probably an approximate equivalent of today's bluffing or bullying, proves effective. Judge Dee, in addition, is capable of procuring a conviction by having his team implement "shadowing," retracing prime suspects' whereabouts after any homicides have taken place and before the killer is captured (Green 72). Other than the questionable methods of interrogation, Judge Dee actually acts like a devoted detective who talks to witnesses in person to get a close look at the victim's life. His personal entanglement resides in the fact that he determines to "chip in" as much as possible, instead of having his inferiors do much legwork.

have equipped criminologists with accurate tools, such as studies of blood smears and blood spatters, only has autopsy come to light in "Five Auspicious Clouds," "The Wrong Sward," and "The Two Beggars."<sup>17</sup> Evidently, what seems obsolete to current readers, for example Judge Dee's "old school" interrogation on murder suspects, might be deemed groundbreaking back then if we measure the effect of Dee's precise and meticulous *modus operandi*, including his substantial use of "documentary evidence to prove every point possible" and "divergent evidentiary approach," against the law's limits (Felman 260). That Judge Dee's dogged pursuit of justice has left an indelible mark on our mind parallels one of the distinguished features which separates hard-boiled crime writing from the infant detective fiction: the "commitment to particular variety of realism that depends heavily on a tough, uncompromising surface verisimilitude" (Reddy 193). Thus, there is a defensive edge to Judge Dee's lack of valuable forensic apparatus to run scientific analyses because with certainty, the exquisite delineation of his outer toughness and inner attentiveness has become an asset in full compensation for visual inspection and embryonic autopsy.

By the same token, the aforesaid annotations explaining the features of hard-boiled detection fiction, which is a literary emblem of Judge Dee's "maleness" as a self-created man, neatly fits his dedication to any ongoing investigations (Reddy 193). Namely, the "intense masculinity," a defining characteristic of Van Gulik's writing, whose ample attention also parallels that of the hardboiled, "all focus on solitary central characters" (Reddy 197). In a large measure on his *bona fide* masculinity, the reading public feels the full power of his "centralization of an alienated male consciousness," "rather stern and unforgiving," and "unable to flatter people" (Reddy 193 and Kinkley 60). In other words, hard-boiled detective writing has become the domain which not only glorifies the conventional masculinity, but also indulges in the "obsessive masculine pursuit" (Reddy

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<sup>17</sup> From a forensic perspective, Judge Dee's one-man show, to some extent, is close to modern investigations. He verifies alibis and traces the whereabouts of suspects before taking them into custody in "The Murder on the Lotus Pond." Added to minutiae in detection, Judge Dee not only reexamines physical evidence, but also takes the body temperature of the corpse in order to develop investigative leads and figure out the C.O.D. (cause of death).

194). To be sure, Van Gulik's writing follows one very special calling to characterize excessive masculinity as Judge Dee "embodies a robust Confucian masculinity, blending literary and martial qualities," and his "aloofness in regard to social fact, resulting in a polished insensitivity to those sociological features of class" keeps his objectivity intact (Furth 77 and Anesko 80).<sup>18</sup> The majority of readers accordingly fall for Judge Dee's legal omnipotence, mainly banking their judicial expectation on his machismo, so that they accidentally embrace the bigoted gender ideology, which miniaturizes Dee's occasional miscalculations to a considerable extent.<sup>19</sup> One way or another, in story after story, Judge Dee's imposing masculinity, though it monopolizes a preponderating proportion of the plot and could conceivably irritate feminists to the point of revulsion, fulfills the reader's eager demands of rendering justice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In a generic sense, Judge Dee, although he is a fantasy figure, puts his skills in "science and humanities, reason and intuition" into action and answers "the needs of the situation" pronto (Glover 37 and Furth 77). Underneath his heroic status, nevertheless, bury "the burdens of power [which] may be weighed later in night thoughts and private melancholy"(Furth 77). When the narrative voice sheds some light on Judge Dee's deep despondency and leaves much room for our unfeigned empathy, which probably counterbalances our initial respectful admiration for him, we take a peep at Dee's momentary self-doubt: "I must confess to you that early this morning I was feeling a bit low, and for a moment actually doubted whether this was after all the right career for me" (Van Gulik, *Judge Dee at Work* 72).

<sup>19</sup> Based on Maureen T. Reddy's observation, Judge Dee's detection of crime is vivid evidence of his omnipotence which is a rather unseemly capability for conventional female detectives. Quite often, as Reddy points out, writers of female detectives have to offer "a variety of explanations for" their protagonists' "silly mistakes," "foolish miscalculations," and eventual inability to unravel "the novel's central mystery" (196). But one rarely spots similar imperfection in Dee's criminal investigation process in part because the enigmatic murder mysteries have blown us away, yet very importantly because eliminating male fallibility corresponds with the existing gender structure which "reiterates the essential masculinity" and questions female professionalism (Reddy 197 and 194).

<sup>20</sup> Many female characters in this collection are either Judge Dee's concubines, local courtesans, or high society prostitutes. We can barely make the same positive associations about them as we do about Judge Dee and his assistants. In contrast to Judge Dee's "maleness," "dangerous, seductive villains or nurturing but essentially insignificant helpmates" conjure up prominent feminine images in crime fiction (Reddy 193). Charlotte Furth penetrates the mysteries of female roles in detective fiction and concludes, "But outside the home, women are dangerous, bitches or temptresses or worse; as adulterous lovers or estranged spouses, some even end up killers" (78). Within the context of Furth's elucidation, the social status of fictional female figures, to some extent, is interchangeable to that of underprivileged women in real life as realism bears out "its claims to verisimilitude" (Crowley 129).

In practice, the structure and creation of detective fiction is neither straightforwardly linear nor self-explanatory. As a consequence, reading detective fiction, in any number of ways, furnishes delightful entertainment and sharpens the reader's mental faculties as well. Given the hotly disputed and marginalized literary status, the meteoric rise of detective fiction, to many critics, holds forth a nontraditional literary wedding with realism in order to "defend the genre against condescension and dismissal and to raise its standing in the wider world of letters" (Glover 37). This unprecedented literary affiliation indeed not only seems opaque, but also gets critics fired up the long-running debate over this assimilation. The yearning for academic improvement, which is much more complicated than giving detective fiction a "face lift," drives crime writers to "repackage" their works for literary and business purposes (Crowley 130). For instance, Wai Chee Dimock takes the measure of the complexity of realism and crime writing and concludes that "The decisions made inside the courtroom – the mental processes of judges and juries – are supposedly guided by rules. Realists argued that they are actually guided by a combination of factors, some social and some idiosyncratic, harnessed to no set protocol" (220). On a sophisticated level, Dimock's insight into the literary intricacies, which does not exclude any potential variables, coerces us into recognizing the unreliability of the judicial system. His remarks, without a doubt, raise our awareness of re-examining detective writing within a more comprehensive sociological framework than before.

It is ironically fitting, then, that the general public, who has vested the trust in the legal system, has to cope with the fact that in real life the law often contradicts a fictional account of justice. After carrying out a reality check, we learn that the law does not necessarily defend or protect anyone, not even the innocent or wrongly accused. As Donald Pizer further clarifies, justice, in a large sense, has become "the same reservoir of humanistic faith" which is supposed to safeguard and improve public morality as well, whereas we all know that sometimes social reality tells us otherwise (*The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* 1). Subsequently, the more likely the "plot formula" for crime

writing leans toward punishing convicts, the principal subtlety which has turned Judge Dee into a hero in a tumultuous society, the more closely a lapse of justice (social reality) intermingles with an exceptional Justice of the Peace (literary ideality) (Panek 177). Conceivably, let us put the intricacies of the judicial system in a nutshell: Robert Van Gulik has inclined Judge Dee, a nonconformist from general aspects, to idiosyncrasy, which probably would not be so eye-catching and overriding if we "shoved" him back to a historical domain of peace like the Tang dynasty. As opposed to bureaucratic barriers and many variables, which can affect detection to some extent, Dee's steady commitment to justice is indispensable to administering the law and minimizing moral disorientation. In the way of cause and effect, once we set aside Judge Dee's immediate legal achievement, we see through to the transparent irony, wrapped up in his great time and devotion to duty, which ridicules the pretensions of the criminal justice system. Just as revealing the truth and enacting justice are viewed by critics as plot staples of crime fiction, so the literary fusion of detective writing and realism can best involve readers in an intricate legal maze which consists of a crippled judicial system, a few human faux pas, and a bumpy road to belated justice. On the purely metaphorical plane, the anomalous literary synthesis as outlined above, for one reason or another, not only dispels readers' suspicion and fear, but also gives them their moral and literary due, without divorcing them from reality.

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