STORIES OF CRIME AND DETECTION

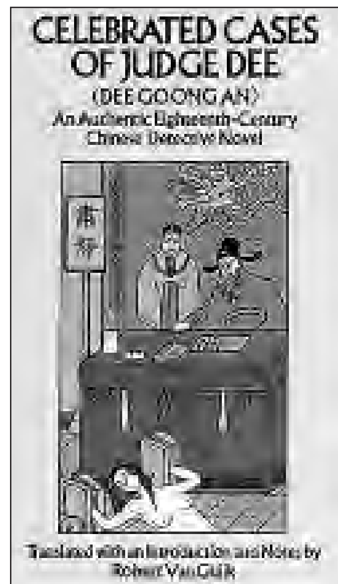
Using the Mystery Formula as an Introduction to Asian Literatures and Cultures

by Joan Cook Wilson

Mysteries, by which I mean stories of crime and detection, are popular in the United States—in print, movies, and on television—and familiar to many high school and college students immersed in popular media. Because they watch *Law & Order* and *Colombo*, and may have read *Devil in a Blue Dress* or *Murder on the Orient Express*, the mystery formula can engage students in Asian literatures and encourage them to analyze underlying constructs of these literatures and cultures, as well as those of their own. I have found that Chinese, Japanese, and Indian works in translation—vernacular and classical—offer palatable dishes in literature and writing classes, where I use them, alongside works of Doyle, Poe and Chandler, to teach a variety of subjects including narrative structure, dramatic technique, character, even logic—as well as to examine cross-cultural milieu and theme.

A literary formula, like the western or love triangle or mystery, is a kind of archetype, a "story pattern embodied in the images, symbols, themes and myths of a particular culture. Story formulas work because they bring into an effective conventional order a large variety of existing cultural and artistic concerns." John Calwelti, discussing "the dialectic between artistic forms and cultural materials," suggests that "formula stories (1) affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with those interests and attitudes . . . , (2) resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values . . . , and (3) enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across the boundary."[1] Stories of crime and detection contain obvious formulaic elements: the crime (and weapon/means/ motives), criminal (insider-outsider), victim, milieu, detective (he/she/agency uncovering the crime), methods of solution (clues, witnesses, interrogation, logic or some "means of reliable knowledge,"[2] even supernatural manifestations), and false clues and accusations; through these formulaic elements, stories also reveal more abstract concepts of social norm, law, punishment, and justice. Because these formulaic elements are so familiar, mysteries can engage students and tempt them to entertain literatures and cultures often very different from their own.

Over the years, I have sleuthed for Asian stories of crime and detection and discovered a variety of texts and possibilities. In Chinese literature, crime stories (*kung-an*) have been discovered in the earliest vernacular writings. These vernacular stories, such as "Master Shen's Bird Destroys Seven Lives," which have structural ties to the vital oral tradition influenced by Buddhist monks, were kept alive in the Song marketplaces by storytellers who performed alongside jugglers, wrestlers, dancers, riddlers and "trained insects."[3] In addition, numerous stories of the magistrate-detective, most predominately Magistrate Bao, (but also Magistrates Dee, Peng, Li, She), seen in early and later Chinese anthologies, in lively Yuan plays like *The Chalk Circle* and *Ghost of the Pot*, and in longer narratives like the Ming *Three Heroes and Five Gallants*, are available in English. The eighteenth-century anonymous Chinese novel translated by Van Gulik as *Dee Goong An: The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* intertwines three stories of crime solved by the famous Tang Dynasty magistrate and gives glimpses into a cross section of life along the Silk Route, in a small village, among the gentry. This exemplary figure survives even today in Chinese movies and Taiwan television drama.



The magistrate figure, often linked to court case documents, also appears in Japanese stories after the seventeenth century, but modern Japanese writers of crime and detection were influenced by widely read translations of Poe, Collins, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Doyle into Japanese in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Major writers, like Naoya Shiga and Kōbō Abe, demonstrating deep interest in psychology and motivation, wrote stories which might be labeled *misuteri* for a wide popular audience; Akutagawa's "In a Grove" and "Rashōmon" were later adapted into the classic film *Rashōmon* by Kurosawa. Tarō Hirai, who took up the pseudonym Edogawa Rampo, wrote in the tradition of Poe's logical and psychological unravelings in stories like "The Psychological Test" and "The Red Chamber." Although readers may see influences of the Western mystery traditions in these

works, including conventions of sub-genres like the puzzler (*pazurā*) or the hard-boiled detective story (*hādo-boirudo*), the weapons and conceptions of crime and criminals reveal Japanese culture. Readers find criminals without guns (which are strictly controlled) using a wide array of means, including faked suicide. Criminal motives, such as honor and family tradition, are seen within the context of a complex society as the abnormal challenges the norm. Short stories like Shiga's "Han's Crime" and Akutagawa's "Rashōmon" and "In a Grove" present views of history, class, and gender even as they focus on philosophical perspectives of crime—questions about human nature, the difficulty of knowing the truth, and shared guilt.

While most Westerners desire the satisfaction of a solution to a crime and a criminal apprehended—a wrong made right—these Japanese stories insist on a philosophical view in which guilt and innocence are less certain. In the 1950s, Seichō Matsumoto and other writers who considered the mystery a serious literary genre moved to social realism and social criticism in works like Matsumoto's *Inspector Imanishi Investigates* and *Points and Lines*, Shōtarō Yasuoka's "Rain," and Tsutomu Minakami's *Mist and Shadow*. Such realistic stories offer students views of daily life in Japan, of customs and culture.

More recently, in an entertaining postmodern mystery, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), Haruki Murakami creates a narrator (reminiscent of Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe) whose heroic quest is for a cream-colored sheep with a star on its back, a sheep who is the power behind a shadow organization that permeates society's "politics, finance, mass communications, culture" and that threatens "total, conceptual anarchy." Yet even this at times fantastic and bizarre mystery offers views of urban Tokyo and the remote island of Hokkaido, of modern marriages and careers gone sour, of an alienated individual and a less traditional Japan. Reading these stunning crime stories by widely respected authors, students visualize Japanese society and culture; analyzing the elements of the mystery formula, students are encouraged to look more deeply at similarities and differences in themes and myths from culture to culture.

Although the mystery is a less developed genre in South Asian literatures, we also find elements of the mystery formula in both ancient and modern works. Motifs of crime and punishment appear in the Buddhist stories that spread from South Asia into China and Japan, like the folk *Jatakas* (*Stories of Buddha's Former Births*) in which readers encounter Buddha as criminal, investigator, and judge; readers are surprised to find both the criminal and victim to be shrewd and the criminal to be completely cruel. In Sanskrit texts translated into English, students will also recognize mystery elements, such as the police interrogation that opens Act IV of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala.* Crime and detection are central to the plot of Sudraka's lively play *Mrcchakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*), which includes a woman victim, an impoverished Brahman plaintiff, a wily criminal framing the accused, a dramatization of the science of theft,[4] a developing investigation, and a courtroom drama (including key witnesses and techniques of interrogation). These elements of the mystery formula in such ancient texts, far removed from most students by time and cultural backdrop, make the works more accessible and encourage students to move to literary traditions in Sanskrit poetics and drama,

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such as *rasa* ("sentiment" or "feeling"), musical *ragas*, ritualized movements, and cultural constructs such as the *sahrdayatva* ("being a person of heart"), *dharma* (moral duty), and *guna* (virtue or merit).[5]

For instance, when students question why the accused Brahman in *The Little Toy Cart* does not act to defend himself even though he is innocent, they most likely question his motivation in the modern psychological view of character, but their questions can lead to a discussion of the Sanskrit tradition central to the plot; this is the dilemma of a *sahrdaya*, an impoverished hero who represents the virtues of feeling and sexuality and who is in conflict with a wealthy social class that cares only about power and luxury. Modern Indian mysteries and detective stories translated into English are also available, notably stories by Satyajit Ray—particularly appealing to younger audiences—and Ramesh Menon's *The Hunt for K*.

For instructors of Asian literature, as well as for those of other classes who want to include Asian texts and perspectives, the mystery formula is rich in possibility. For example, Chinese *kung-an* are relevant to the introduction of vernacular versus literary (*wen-yen)* traditions, to the Buddhist influence on Chinese literature, and to the structure of the narrative, with all its philosophical implications. Elements of the mystery story formula—including the motive for crime, the inexorable fate that weaves through various story threads toward a solution, the emphasis on punishment as a means of social and heavenly justice—will lead students into Chinese traditions. As students analyze the narrative of the early *kung-an* stories, they will see possibilities different from those in typical Western narratives in the combination of prose and poetry, the didactic interludes, the arrangements of events, and the emphasis on overlapping events. They will see different philosophical backdrops and aesthetics in these stories that clearly teach the Confucian morality of "the consequences of folly," and "the Principle of Heaven," affirmed in the verse that closes "Master Shen's Bird Destroys Seven Lives:"[6]

> Amass good and you meet with good;
> Amass ill, ill you will incur.
> When all is fully understood,
> Both Earth and Heaven never err.

The mortal who errs, the criminal, is most often uncovered by the Chinese Magistrate of official history and fiction.

Detective, judge, and jury combined, the Magistrate allows us to examine crime and punishment in Chinese social and historical milieu, to look at the constructs of justice and punishment and at other Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist philosophical underpinnings, and to analyze character. The persistent Magistrate Bao tradition, arguably the largest corpus of stories in Chinese colloquial fiction, suggests issues central to literary theory—first, the impor-

tance of history in Chinese narrative. Bao (Pao Cheng), who lived from 999–1062 and served as prefect of K'ai-feng-fu, is the model of the upright official. During his lifetime, Bao's deeds and essential character were recorded in official documents; after his death, Bao's fame grew: this exemplary figure gained stature and power not only in "official commemoration," but also in vernacular stories, because he demonstrated wisdom exemplified in *The Chalk Circle*, fairness in treating wealthy and poor alike, and honesty that disarmed his adversaries. By the end of the thirteenth century, Bao, although at times fallible, had assumed an additional extraterrestrial role as "Permanent Judge of the Court of Prompt Retribution at Mount Tai" in the Yuan plays, placing "the human tribunal of K'ai-feng, the subterranean court of the justice of King Yama and the Celestial Hall of Purgatory on Mt. Tai side by side . . . in positive identification as the three spheres of a single reality informed equally with the principle of justice, . . . [unifying] (1) the Chinese Triad: Heaven, Earth, and Man, and (2) the three religions—Confucianism (the detective), Buddhism (King Yama), and Taoism (Mt. Tai)."[7]

In his study of Yuan Pao plays, Professor Hayden suggests that Judge Pao in late Ming stories and plays is not the same figure seen in Yuan drama; so, the very persistence of this magistrate figure in a wide range of works over ten centuries offers a lengthy tradition in which to examine character in Chinese fiction. Looking at Bao in the Yuan plays and in *Three Heroes and Five Gallants,* for example, we might ask to what extent character is individual or type, fixed or fluid, tied to wider social roles or freed to respond in an individual moment; we might also explore how characters create a dynamic of relatedness.

Students familiar with the police investigator—Inspector Morse, Poirot, and others—are able to compare and contrast these to the figure of Magistrate Bao, to Inspector Imanishi, or even to the "investigator" constructs in the *Jatakas*. They may be surprised by some of these investigators and by what investigation might mean: although Inspector Imanishi may be some what familiar, investigators in the *Jatakas* include not only Buddha (*Bodhisatta*), but also trained and ordinary folk, King Mirror-face, and Sage. In *The Hunt for K*, set in modern Delhi, detective Partha investigates murder in the corrupt urban world, in which materialism run amuck is contrasted to social responsibility (*dharma*), the insignificant detective to the mythic hero Arjuna, the mundane and material to the classical and transcendent. Beginning his investigation of a locked-room murder with a clue from the *Bhagavad Gita,* this increasingly passive detective discovers the "criminal" and transcends the corruption of Delhi with an ancient prayer: "He stands laughing in delight, a cosmic child, enfolded in the conflagration of tenderness." The familiar face of the investigator leads students to unfamiliar philosophical and mythic traditions.

The mystery formula also inevitably leads students to question the legal underpinnings of societies reflected in ancient and modern works of literature. As they examine the legal institutions embodied in *Dee Goong An* or *Mrcchakatika,* they can begin to analyze constructs of authority, punishment and justice within cultural contexts, and to confront new concepts of evidence and logic. By what means do investigators form conclusions? What is evidence? The *Nyaya Sutras* enumerate four constructs of proof, four *Pramanas*: "perception," "inference," "inference by analogy or comparison," and "reliable authority"[8] (e.g. *Vedas*). What is reliable knowledge in "Rashōmon" and "In a Grove"? What is the truth—who the victim, who the criminal? Such reliable knowledge to Judge Dee in the Tang Dynasty drawn in *Dee Goong An* includes supernatural manifestations, dreams, and almost divine intuition. This evidence is quite different from that which students expect today in a Western courtroom. So, finally, examining and understanding other concepts of law and knowledge can also lead students to examine and better understand their own institutions, their own cultures.

The mystery formula can lead students into Asian literatures—classical and vernacular—and enable them to be engaged by unfamiliar literary and cultural traditions. Literature offers students a relatively smooth introduction into culture. Rather than serving up generalizations about cultures and time periods, stories and plays offer characters and narrative lines, images and settings. However, precisely because of their familiarity with the mystery formula, students may initially be willing, even eager, when reading a work like *Dee Goong An*, to draw strong conclusions about "the Chinese" or about Chinese society in the Tang Dynasty, but students are usually amenable to persuasion—to acknowledge that one story or sampling is not sufficient to label an entire culture in a given historical period. They are seeing one writer's historical and cultural perspective, one story, one play. In discussing literary formulae, Calwelti warns us that, in differentiating literary imperative from expression of cultural values, "We cannot take individual symbols and myths at their face value. . . . [Rather, we need to] uncover basic patterns in many different individual works and even many different formulas."[9] If both teacher and students keep this important admonition in mind, stories of crime and detection can draw them into more thoughtful examination and deeper appreciation of the literatures and cultures of Asia. ■

NOTES

1. John G. Calwelti, "The Study of Literary Formulas" in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 5–9, 16–8, 20–33, 35–6. Rpt. in *Detective Fiction*: *A Collection of Critical Essays.* Ed. Robin Winks (Woodstock, Vt.: Country Press, 1988), 121–43.
2. A. L. Basham, "Appendix VII: Logic and Epistemology" in *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 501.
3. John Lyman Bishop, "The San Yen and Their Antecedents" in *The Colloquial Short Story in China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), 8.
4. See Biswas, E. B. *Crime and Detective Sciences in Selected Ancient Indian Literature* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1987), 58–60.
5. Robert E. Goodwin, Introduction to *The Little Clay Cart*. Trans. A. L. Basham (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 1–9.
6. Translated by John Lyman Bishop in *The Colloquial Short Story in China,* 48–64.
7. George A. Hayden, *Crime and Punishment in Medieval Chinese Drama: Three Judge Pao Plays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 16.
8. See Basham, 503.
9. John G. Calwelti, "The Study of Literary Formulas," in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays,* 141.

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