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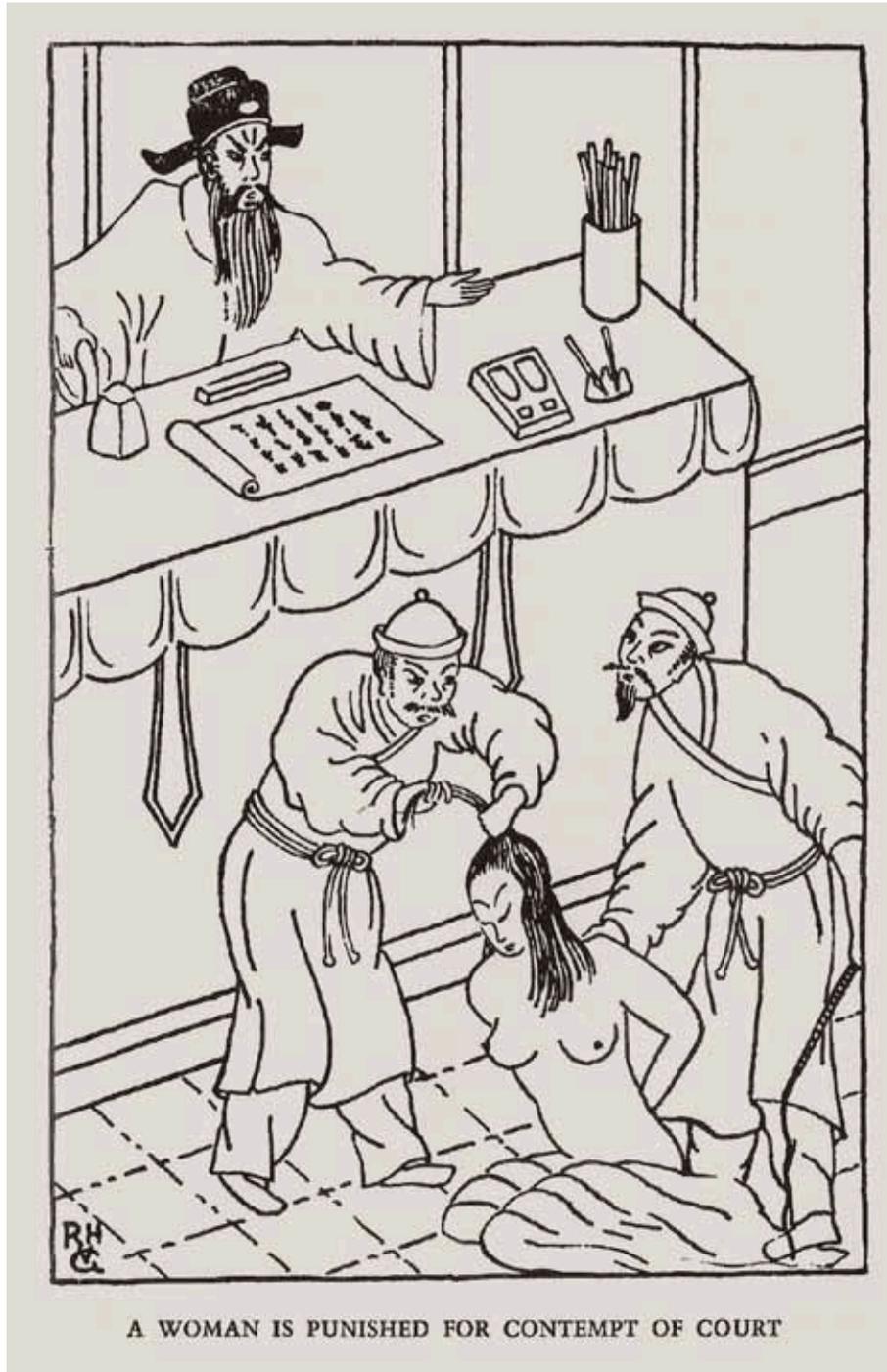
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Fig. 1
Robert van Gulik,
'A Woman Is Punished
for Contempt of
Court'. Illustration
in *The Chinese Nail
Murders*, p. 127



REPACKAGING THE LITERATI WORLD ILLUSTRATIONS IN ROBERT VAN GULIK'S DETECTIVE NOVELS

In addition to a career as a diplomat, an outstanding sinologist and an expert on the material culture of China, Robert van Gulik is also remembered as a successful writer of detective novels. Inspired by the late eighteenth-century novel *Four Great and Strange Cases from the Era of Empress Wu Zetian* (*Wu Zetian si da qi'an*), which he translated into English in 1949, he began writing his own Judge Dee series the following year. These novels, highly popular in the English-speaking world, found a new following in the 1980s in translation and in TV and film adaptations in China. Meanwhile, Van Gulik has attracted scholarly attention over the past two decades both from students of material culture who have valued his visionary research on material aspects of elite life,¹ and from those who have re-examined and critiqued his work through today's inexorable postcolonial lens.² Both these aspects of scholarship offer useful perspectives for a study of the illustrations that Van Gulik made for his novels. The present article examines how Van Gulik appropriated imagery from Ming (1368-1644) popular culture for his illustrations and argues that the way he cultivated a 'genuine old Chinese style', to use his own words,³ served to repackage and imagine the material life of the Ming elite.

The 'genuine old Chinese style'

One of the aspects of Van Gulik's novels that readers particularly enjoy are his illustrations. In a detailed comparison, Piet Rombouts has found that more than half of these drawings can be traced back to existing imagery, especially two liberally-illustrated Ming novels: *Biographies of Eminent Women* (*Lienü zhuan*) and *Complete Biographies of Immortals* (*Liexian quanzhuan*). The source of Van Gulik's illustrations also include maps, paintings, illustrations in treatises and other novels.⁴ Although all the stories in the Judge Dee series revolve around the brilliant, morally upright mandarin Di Renjie (630-700) and are therefore set in the Tang dynasty (618-906), the visual and written sources that inspired him mainly derive from the popular novels of the late Ming and early Qing (1644-1911) a period that Van Gulik especially favoured for the sophisticated cultural taste and leisurely lifestyle of its educated elite.⁵ At the outset of his literary career, Van Gulik explained that he kept his illustrations in a 'genuine old Chinese style' by faithfully copying from originals. Van Gulik employed all the techniques and incorporated all the components of the late imperial repertoire of visual culture, including figures, furniture, objects in scholars' studios, interior design, composition and perspective.

Mise-en-scène

Viewed from the perspective of a broader art-historical genealogy, Van Gulik's attempt to cultivate a 'genuine old' style may also be seen as a calculated construction of a new visual narrative. Since interrogation is a major theme in each novel and a recurring motif in his illustrations, interrogation scenes may serve as a departure point from which to unpack this complex process. Take 'A Woman Is Punished for Contempt of Court' in *The Chinese Nail Murders* for example (fig. 1). Van Gulik's version is evidently based on the illustration of 'Yan Rui from Tiantai' in *Biographies of Eminent Women* (fig. 2), although with fewer figures and details. The juxtaposition of Judge Dee and the perpetrator, Mrs Kuo, creates a diagonal line in both compositions; in Van Gulik's version, the two clerks are wearing the same clothing and strike the same pose; the spatial arrangement and the shape of the floor and the desk are also the same. The reasoning behind the structure of these visual components appears similar to the mise-en-scène on a theatre stage. The framing and staging of a seemingly genuine setting provide a safe and free space for the visual narrative.

Fig. 2
Qiu Ying, 'Yan Rui
from Tiantai' (Tiantai
Yan Rui). Illustration in
*Biographies of Eminent
Women* (Lienü zhuan),
juan 12, p. 21b-22a

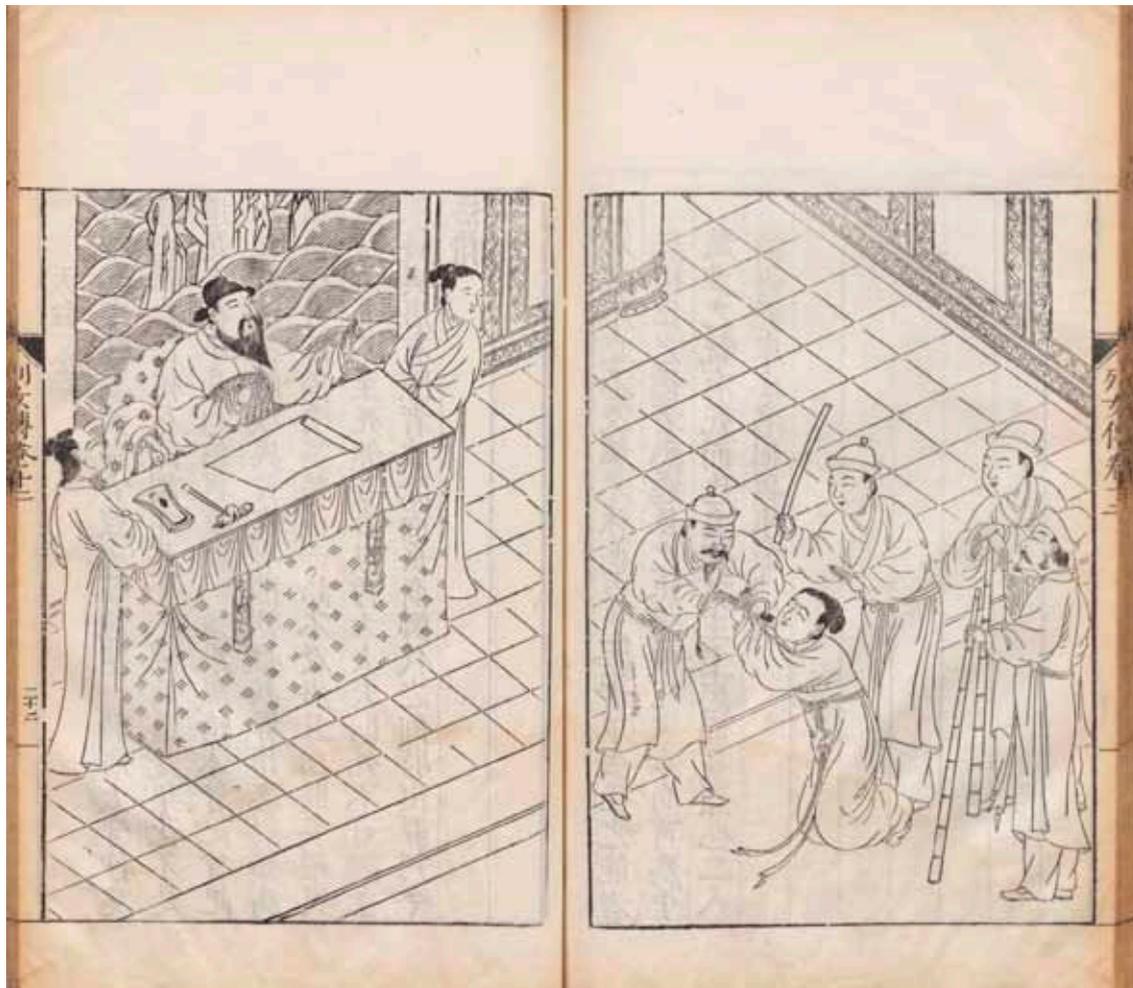


Fig. 3
Anonymous, *Variegated
Positions of the Flowery
Battle* (*Huaying jinzhen*
[*hua-ying-chin-chen*]),
in Van Gulik 2003,
p. 253



Fantasy of the other

While employing existing imagery, Van Gulik also experimented by modifying iconographic features of the protagonist Judge Dee and introducing the female nude. The *Four Great and Strange Cases from the Era of Empress Wu Zetian* presents a humble aged Judge Dee in front of the emperor and empress. By contrast, Van Gulik's illustration is an idealized image of a younger, more emphatic Judge Dee (fig. 1). His excessively long beard and dramatic facial expression, an official's seal on the desk, and the writing on the paper suggest Dee's authority and quality.⁶

The nail murder motif can be traced to a thirteenth-century compilation of legal cases, *Parallel Cases from under the Pear Tree* (*Tangyin bishi*), and was later adapted into a longer story in *Judge Shi's Cases* (*Shigong an*), both familiar to Van Gulik.⁷ The interrogation scene shows the moment when Dee gives the order and the two clerks prepare to torture Mrs Kuo (fig. 2). While torture was a historical reality in late imperial China, Van Gulik's bold innovation was to depict Kuo as a voluptuous naked woman in this violent scene, as he did with female characters in his other novels too. While nudity is common in Ming erotic paintings ('Spring Palace Painting,' *chungong hua*) (fig. 3), men and women are

always depicted equally (semi) naked in these scenes of seductive sexual pleasure.⁸ The female nude in Van Gulik's novels is often shown facing fully-clothed male officials, such as Judge Dee here.

The visual effect of this compositional contrast between a semi-naked felon and a fully-clothed judge objectifies the female body and legitimizes social and gender-related male dominance. Yet, in an age in which Fu Manchu and Sumuru were all part of popular culture, Van Gulik's Western readers would not have been surprised or distressed by scenes like this.

Conclusion

Van Gulik was a unique sinologist in his day. His linguistic talent and exposure to Chinese culture since growing up in the Dutch East Indies enabled him to develop a broad interest in Chinese art and literature. He was a serious researcher who also emulated the idealized lifestyle of China's educated elite. For example, he played the *guqin* (a Chinese lute), practised calligraphy and seal carving and even kept a gibbon. In his novels he relocated his fictionalized mandarin, a brilliant scholar, and various oriental women into the repackaged material world of the Ming elite. In the accompanying illustrations a 'genuine old Chinese style' meets his fascination with oriental women.

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NOTES

- 1 Chen 2009; Clunas 1991, pp. 9-10; Ko 2012.
- 2 Furth 2005; Rocha 2011; Adams 2015, pp. 253-256.
- 3 Van Gulik 2003, p. xvii.
- 4 Rombouts 2019, p. 6.
- 5 He named his study 'Pavilion of Respecting the Ming' (Zunming ge).
- 6 Van Gulik had made a systematic study of the material aspects of painting and calligraphy. See Moore 2014, pp. 238-241.
- 7 Benedetti 2014; Gui Wanrong 1956; Sommers 1999.
- 8 This is a subject that Van Gulik introduced to the West. He considered the sexual dynamic between male and female to be more equal in China than in the West; Rocha 2011.