

Robert van Gulik and the Judge Dee Stories

By Chen Chih-mai

WHEN DR. ROBERT HANS VAN GULIK died in The Hague in September 1967, the world press identified him as (1) a Dutch career diplomat whose last post was as his country's Ambassador to Japan, and (2) the author of a long series of detective stories featuring the Chinese statesman of the T'ang Dynasty, Dee Jen-djeh [狄仁傑], who was such a master in solving strange and complicated murder cases.

Dr. van Gulik was indeed a diplomat of outstanding abilities and accomplishments, having served in a number of important and sensitive posts—Japan, China, the United States, India, Lebanon, Syria, Malaysia and Korea, besides several terms of duty in the Foreign Ministry in The Hague. Over a period of some fifteen years, he also wrote a number of detective stories, all with Judge Dee as the principal character against the background of T'ang Dynasty China.

But he was much more than a diplomat and a mystery story writer. From his early youth, he devoted himself to the study of Chinese and Japanese language and literature. He was a serious student of Oriental history and culture. In the course of a lifetime, he produced a number of books and monographs which are universally regarded as penetrating and authoritative, often in areas seldom frequented by other Sinologists.

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Languages came naturally to him. He learned them eagerly, but more as tools in academic work than as means of social contacts. His emphasis was on the ability to read a foreign language rather than to speak it well. He spoke all the foreign languages with a strong Dutch accent, but because of his familiarity with them, he was easily understood. His method of language training was translation, usually from various foreign languages into Dutch or English.

BORN IN ZUTPHEN, The Netherlands, in 1910, the fifth son of Lieutenant-General Willem van Gulik of the Dutch Army, he went to the Dutch East Indies when he was four years old. He stayed there for nine years, attending schools in Batavia and Surabaya, where he learned the Indonesian language. In 1923 he returned to The Netherlands and was enrolled in the Grammar School at Nijmegen. Upon graduation, he went on to the State University at Leiden, where he studied law and polity as well as Chinese language and literature. In the University, he also acquired a command of the languages commonly required in European university courses—Latin and Greek, English, French and German. Upon receiving his Bachelor's degree, he transferred to the State University at Utrecht, where he pursued advanced studies under

supplied by the Editors and based on information obtained in the above volume. Dr. Chen, scholar and diplomat, has been Republic of China's Ambassador to the Philippines, Australia, and Japan and is now stationed in the Vatican. He is the author, among other books, of *Chinese Calligraphers and Their Art*, Melbourne University Press, 1966.

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the famous linguist Professor C. C. Uhlenbeck, learning Sanskrit and Tibetan, while continuing his study of Chinese and Japanese. He even helped Professor Uhlenbeck in compiling an English-Blackfoot dictionary, Blackfoot being the language of a tribe of American Indians. His versatility in languages, ancient and modern, is evidenced by his doctoral dissertation at the University at Utrecht, the subject of which is:

Hayagriva, the Mantrayanic Aspect of the Horse-cult in China and Japan, with an Introduction on the horse-cult in India and Tibet.

With this highly technical monograph, he was awarded the D.Litt (*cum laude*) in 1935.

His writing career began early. When he was sixteen, still a pupil in the Grammar School, he began contributing poems and articles to his school publication *Rostra*, starting with a series called *Tales from the Beautiful Island*, nostalgic sketches of his boyhood experiences in Indonesia which were, as he recalled them, "typically adolescent, pseudo-love and pseudo-philosophical". He began writing on China when he was eighteen, notes and comments on classical Chinese literature and the arts. He was so well regarded that he was soon asked to contribute entries on China to the

Winkler Prins Encyclopedie, the big Dutch encyclopedia. Under the expert guidance of Professor Uhlenbeck, he translated from Sanskrit into Dutch the *Urvaci*, a play in poetry by the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa of the fifth century. In a note Dr. van Gulik made later, he said that "the translation is correct, being made under the guidance of Professor Uhlenbeck, but the Dutch style is stilted, greatly influenced by my translations from Latin and Greek". He also noted that he decorated the book with vignettes which he drew after old Indian paintings. This point is of particular interest, for all his books and articles, including his detective stories, were profusely illustrated, often by drawings he made after old models.

It may seem rather odd that, despite his obvious interest in academic studies, he never for a moment entertained the idea of entering the teaching profession. He explained this to me years later by saying that, very early in his life, he became convinced of the wisdom of the traditional Chinese practice of combining intellectual pursuits with an official career. In China, he said, a scholar taught students only when he failed to gain entrance into the government service, which was true from Confucius and Mencius down to the present time. It was for this reason that, as soon as he had completed his formal education, he entered the Dutch

Foreign Service and before long was appointed Secretary of the Dutch Embassy in Japan. He arrived in Tokyo in 1935, a young man of twenty-five, who already had acquired a command of the Japanese language and a familiarity with Japanese history and culture.

HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENT to Japan extended over seven years. He travelled all over Japan, and made several extensive trips to nearby China, building up a library and cultivating the friendship of Chinese and Japanese scholars. He must have cut a strange figure in China and Japan, this tall and heavy-set young man from Europe who took as his ideal life that of a traditional Chinese man of letters, a public official who indulged himself not only in the pursuit of poetry and the classics but also enriched his life by music, chess-playing, calligraphy and painting. His Chinese and Japanese friends in those days spoke and wrote fondly of him, collating literary endeavours with him frequently and giving him their own calligraphic works and paintings, all of which he cherished with loving care throughout his life.

Instead of undertaking analytical studies of the classics as most Sinologists do, his first serious project was to pursue an obscure subject, that of the Chinese lute (*ch'in*), a zither-type stringed instrument which the Chinese have been playing since remote antiquity. He studied the lute from all angles, seeking references to it in the classics and literature, learning its scores, playing the instrument under the guidance of a Chinese teacher, and ending up by writing a large volume on it. *The Lore of the Chinese Lute: An Essay in Ch'in Ideology* [琴道] is an authoritative work which has no parallel even in Oriental literature. It was published in 1941 by the Sophia University in Tokyo as a monograph of the series *Monumenta Nipponica*, of which he was an editor from the beginning. Besides the erudition of the work, one is particularly amazed by a short and concise preface he wrote, which is in a Chinese literary style so classical that few Chinese writers would attempt it in this age.

As far as written Chinese is concerned, he was a rank conservative. He refused to write in vernacular Chinese (*pai hua*) which has become the vogue in modern China, and he even refrained from punctuating his writings in the modern manner. It was

only natural that he opposed vigorously the "simplification" of Chinese language undertaken by the Chinese Communists.

His interest in the lute led him to explore how the instrument and its music found their way into Japan. It appeared that a Chinese Buddhist monk by the name of Tung-kao,¹ who came to Japan in 1677, could have been responsible for the development of "the lore of the lute" in Japan. For many years, Dr. van Gulik painstakingly traced the footsteps of this rather obscure Chinese monk all over Japan, collecting a vast amount of materials from temples and old bookshops. In his notes, he recorded the ecstasy he experienced when he accidentally came across in Kyoto a large scroll by Tung-kao. It was his intention to write a biography and to edit and publish the complete works of the monk. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941 forced him to leave Japan in a hurry, and some of the materials he so assiduously collected, including the priceless scroll, were lost.

After Pearl Harbor, Dr. van Gulik was transferred to Chungking, where he served as First Secretary of the Dutch Embassy in China. Those were difficult days for him, as his country was overrun by the Nazis and China was engaged in a desperate struggle with a substantial portion of her territory under enemy occupation. But Dr. van Gulik was his old self, going about town cultivating the friendship of Chinese men of letters and artists. He even gave several public recitals of the lute to raise money for the common war effort.

During these years, he also met Miss Shui Shih-fang [水世芳] (Frances Shui), a university graduate from a good Chinese family. He quickly fell in love with Miss Shui and they became engaged. He took his future bride around to meet his Chinese friends who set up parties during which he recited his most recent poetic compositions and played the lute. Dr. van Gulik and Miss Shui were married on December 18, 1943, in Chungking, first in a Christian ceremony and later in a Chinese ceremony, both of which were attended by a large

¹According to Dr. van Gulik's research findings, the monk was originally named Chiang Hsing-ch'ou (蔣興儔), courtesy name Hsin-yueh (心越) and styled Tung-kao (東皐); he was born in 1639 (the 12th year of the reign of Ch'ung-chen, Ming dynasty), went to Nagasaki in 1677 and died in 1695 (the 34th year of K'ang-hsi, Ch'ing dynasty).

number of Chinese writers and artists who showered the couple with their works as wedding presents. The union was a very happy one, to which three sons (Willem Robert, Pieter Anton and Thomas Mathijs) and one daughter (Pauline Francis) were born.

With the assistance of his friends, *The Selected Works of Tung-kao*, a slender volume containing what was salvaged of the materials pertaining to the Chinese monk, was published in Chungking. The bulk of the volume consists of poems Tung-kao composed to express his longings for the Ming Dynasty, which had, by the time Tung-kao migrated to Japan, fallen under the Manchus. The most rewarding reading, however, is Tung-kao's biography written by Dr. van Gulik, again in classical Chinese. He was, however, unable to prove conclusively that it was indeed Tung-kao who first brought the Chinese lute into Japan. There were Japanese writers who maintained that the ancient instrument had found its way into Japan long before Tung-kao set foot there.

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A DRAWING by Dr. van Gulik. Reprinted from "Sinologue Extraordinaire" in *Hemisphere*, Canberra, August 1968.

AT THE END OF the second world war, by which time Dr. van Gulik had stayed in China for almost four years, he was recalled to The Hague. A year later, he was sent to Washington to serve on the Far Eastern Commission, the eleven-nation body in charge of formulating policies for the occupation of Japan. In 1948, when the basic policies had been laid down, he was again assigned to Tokyo to supervise their implementation. In war-devastated Tokyo, he re-established the facilities to pursue his academic studies with his accustomed vigour.

It was during the early part of his second sojourn in Japan that he, somewhat by accident, translated a well-known Chinese detective story with Judge Dee as the chief crime investigator. He found the story fascinating, with all the ingredients of a first-class mystery, and could not understand why the Chinese in modern times became as excited by the translations of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries as if they saw this type of novel for the first time. True enough, the old Chinese were unfamiliar with microscopic examination and fingerprint identification, and they were prone to introduce supernatural elements into the stories, such as the magistrate taking evidence of the departed in the next world. But leaving such elements out, the Chinese detectives were equipped with keen analytical minds and were quite capable of weighing conflicting evidence; excellent stories could be written about them.

To prove the point, Dr. van Gulik undertook to write a story with Judge Dee as the magistrate solving a multiple murder case. This he called *The Chinese Bell Murders*. It was purely for convenience that the story was drafted in English: he had no intention whatsoever of having it published for the English-reading public. Rather, his idea was to have it re-written in Chinese and Japanese to demonstrate how richly endowed Oriental literature was in materials for detective novels. He first had the story translated into Japanese and tried to find a publisher. This proved difficult, because the story had an anti-Buddhist slant and no Japanese publisher would touch it.

Undaunted by this initial failure, Dr. van Gulik wrote another story, *The Chinese Maze Murders*, which also was drafted in English and rendered into Japanese. The publication of this novel also ran into unexpected trouble. Dr. van Gulik tells us himself:

... Since in post-war Japan there had arisen a "Cult of the Nude", the publisher insisted on my including a female nude in the cover design. I informed him that I could not do that, because I wanted to keep my illustrations in genuine old Chinese style, and that in China, owing to the prudish Confucianist tradition, there never developed an artistic school of drawing nude human bodies. The publisher, however, wanted me to make sure of this anyway, so I wrote identical letters to a few dozen antiquarian booksellers in China and Japan of my acquaintance, asking whether they had Ming prints of nudes. As a matter of course, I did not include in my search the coarse, pornographical pictures peddled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in China's port cities. All answers were negative, except for two: a bookseller in Shanghai wrote me that one of their (sic) customers possessed a few erotic albums of the Ming period and was willing to let me have tracings of these pictures; and a curio-dealer in Kyoto informed me he had a set of actual Ming printing-blocks of an erotic album, containing large-size male and female nudes. I purchased these blocks, and had tracings made of the albums of the Shanghai collector. . . . The female nude that ultimately appeared on the cover of the Japanese edition of *The Chinese Maze Murders*, and all other nudes in the plates I added to my novels, are based on these Ming albums.

THE DISCOVERY OF the printing-blocks of the Ming erotic album led Dr. van Gulik into a new field of research. The last few decades of the Ming Dynasty were noted for the production of a number of erotic novels, of which *The Golden Lotus* (*Chin P'ing Mei*) is easily the best and best known. It was also a period when leading figure painters, including such luminaries as Ch'iu Ying [仇英] and T'ang Yin [唐寅], drew realistic bedroom scenes which inspired lesser artists to produce erotic pictures which were printed from multi-coloured blocks.

These erotic albums, according to Dr. van Gulik, are of "striking artistic qualities", and such albums as the *Feng Liu Chueh Ch'ang* [風流絕暢] (translated by Dr. van Gulik as *Summum Elegantium*) are "among the finest examples of Chinese colour printing" and perhaps the world's earliest. The literature and pictures led him into a systematic exploration of the entire field of Chinese sexual life from remote antiquity to the end of the Ming Dynasty (1644). Subsequently, he wrote two huge books, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* [秘戲圖考] (three volumes) and *Sexual Life in Ancient China* [中國古代房內考].

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INTERIOR WITH NUDE: *another van Gulik drawing made from a Ming original.*

The first of these books, a compilation partly in English and partly in Chinese, was published in 1951 for private circulation and limited to fifty copies. Since the book was distributed only to libraries, museums and a few friends, Dr. van Gulik must have spent a small fortune on the undertaking. Volume I is in English, a general survey of the literature and art on Chinese sexual life over the centuries. Volume II consists of selected passages from ten ancient Chinese erotic writings which are not generally available to the public. Volume III is a complete reproduction of the Ming erotic album *Hua Ying Chin Chen* [花營錦陣] (translated by Dr. van Gulik as "Variegated Positions of the Flowery Battle") which he acquired from the Kyoto curio-dealer; there are twenty-four pictures, with accompanying verses.

The second book, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, appeared in English in 1962. Historical and so-

biological materials were added to help the general reader. Erotic quotations were either deleted or rendered in Latin, and realistic bedroom scenes were left out of the illustrations. The book is easily the best survey of the subject in any language.

Dr. van Gulik's study of Chinese sexual habits leads to certain conclusions. One is that, despite the seemingly unnatural practices advocated by the Taoists, Chinese sexual habits over the ages have been "healthy and normal". His study convinced him that "the current foreign conception of the depraved and abnormal sexual habits of the ancient Chinese was completely wrong". He went on to say:

... a historical survey of Chinese sexual relations, the mainspring of life, makes one inclined to the belief that it was primarily the careful balancing of the male and the female elements—studied in China as far back as the beginning of our era—that caused the permanence of the Chinese race and culture. For it would seem that it was this balance that engendered the intense vital power that, from remote antiquity to the very present, has ever sustained and renewed the Chinese race.

Another conclusion he arrived at is that the Chinese erotic prints of the late Ming period exercised a marked influence on the early Japanese print-makers. The Ming prints, which flourished in the seventy-year period between 1570 and 1640, were introduced in substantial quantity into Japan in about 1700. One of the early Japanese print-makers, Hishikawa Moronobu, was clearly under Chinese influence. "Early Japanese *ukiyo-e* artists", Dr. van Gulik said, "not only adopted the Chinese technique of colour printing but also closely copied the style of drawing, sometimes even confining their work to simply giving a Japanese flavour to a Chinese picture." He printed in his earlier book a Chinese picture (from the Ming album *Feng Liu Chueh Ch'ang*) and a Japanese picture (attributed to Hishikawa Moronobu) side by side to prove the point.

WHILE DOING his research on Chinese sexual life, Dr. van Gulik did not lose interest in the fictitious activities of Judge Dee. During his brief sojourn in New Delhi he was, he told me, "like a fish out of water": his library was not with him, and he was uncertain about the length of his stay. For lack of anything more substantial to do, he re-wrote *The*

Chinese Maze Murders in Chinese.² Typically, he did it in the style of the classical Chinese novel, heading each chapter with suggestive couplets, interspersing the text with delightful poems (the most important clue to one of the murders is an erotic poem composed by the murderer), and ending each chapter with the traditional sentence, "if you wish to know what happens next, read on in the next chapter".

Although he never meant his detective novels for the English-reading public, his first two stories nevertheless attracted the attention of publishers in the Western world. When they appeared in print in English, they were widely acclaimed by a public which was fed up with the Charlie Chan type of Chinese detective stories, featuring the pigtail, the bound feet, opium-smoking, and other "quaint" Chinese customs.³

Their success prompted his publisher to ask for more. Dr. van Gulik wrote them whenever he could. *The Chinese Nail Murders* was written during the civil war in Lebanon, when his house was in a cross-fire between government and rebel forces. *The Lacquer Screen* was conceived when he was vacationing with his family in Greece. He was also prevailed upon to write short stories and compose comic strips, with Judge Dee as the principal character, for Dutch and Scandinavian publications. The stories brought him fame and a small fortune, which enabled him to continue his less remunerative pursuits.

One of them was his interest in Oriental art. Early in his life he practised calligraphy assiduously, using the brush as dexterously as the Chinese and Japanese. He learned to carve seals, although he could do it only occasionally because of his weak eyesight. His main preoccupation was reading treatises on art, many of which he translated into English. After more than thirty years of study, he produced in 1958 a huge volume entitled *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* [書畫鑑賞彙編], published by the Italian Institute for Middle and Far Eastern Studies in Rome.

²Entitled *Ti jen-chieh ch'i an* (狄仁傑奇案) and published in 1953 by the Nanyang Printing Company in Singapore.

³For Dr. van Gulik's research into these topics see "More About Judge Dee" appended at the end of this article.

As usual, this book is based entirely on Chinese and Japanese sources. The emphasis of the first part is on the craft of mounting scrolls, a relatively neglected subject in Chinese and Japanese literature. This is followed by a discussion of the various aspects of appraising works of art, with a most interesting chapter on how forgers are able to deceive even the most discerning. But on the key question of authentication, the book falls short of expectations. Most notably, it does not go into the highly important question of the different techniques employed by different painters, the various types of linear treatment (*miao* 描) of the figure painters and the various type of brush strokes employed by the landscape painters to contourise rocks and hillsides (*ts'un* 皴), which have always been regarded as the main criteria of authentication by the Chinese and Japanese experts. In this important sense, the book was a disappointment, brought about, it seems, by Dr. van Gulik's lifelong inclination to concentrate on obscure books often at the expense of standard works.

For thirteen years, 1952 to 1965, Dr. van Gulik led a somewhat wandering life. He served in a number of posts in widely separated parts of the world—New Delhi for a year, The Hague for two, the Middle East for three, Kuala Lumpur for three (here he reached the top of his profession, the Ambassadorship, in 1960), and back to The Hague

for two. Finally, in 1965, he was again in Tokyo as Dutch Ambassador to Japan and concurrently to the Republic of Korea. In all these years, he never lost interest in academic research, although the frequent journeys and the unsettled conditions of some of the places where he served must have made it rather trying for him at times. When he was in Kuala Lumpur, he went into the publishing business with a young Chinese friend, and this proved, surprisingly enough, financially rewarding.

BACK IN TOKYO for the third time in 1965, he was determined to settle down once again to academic studies. The Dutch Embassy residence in the Shiba sector of Tokyo, in the shadow of the Tokyo Tower, is spacious and well appointed. He divided the house into two distinct sections, one where he worked as the Dutch Ambassador to Japan, and the other where he indulged in his studies. In the former section, the *décor* was European, with a few lithographs of the early Dutch settlement in Japan, principally Nagasaki. The latter section was entirely Oriental. In these surroundings, he proceeded to open up a new field of research and writing, and the subject he chose, again an obscure one, was "Chinese animal lore".

For some years, Dr. van Gulik was fascinated by the gibbon, an animal found in the deep mountains of China, usually seen only by monks and recluses,

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AN ILLUSTRATION by van Gulik for *The Fox-Magic Murders, a Judge Dee story*. Published by Panther Books, 1973.

but mentioned frequently in Chinese literature. Dr. van Gulik dug deep into the literature on the animal and even kept one as a pet, carefully observing its behaviour and recording its musical call. On the basis of his observations and study, Dr. van Gulik published *The Gibbon in China* [長臂猿考] in 1967, a slender volume which includes a gramophone record of the call in a pocket attached to the end paper.

The Gibbon in China was intended as the first of a series. Unfortunately, it turned out to be Dr. van Gulik's last book, for he died on September 24, 1967, in The Hague where he was on leave with his family and when the book was just coming off

the press.

Dr. van Gulik was a remarkable man, and his extraordinary career managed to combine subtly and admirably the best of the East and the West. His inclination to explore the unfrequented areas of Sinology has thrown light on many dark corners hitherto unexplored by students of Chinese history and culture. His novels have delighted millions of readers, who are confident that the background is authentic. In the man himself, we have a rare example of a European gentleman who chose to lead the life of a Chinese man of letters and made a complete success of it.

More About Judge Dee

JUDGE DEE was a historical person; he lived from 630 to 700 A.D., and was a brilliant detective and famous statesman of the T'ang dynasty. The adventures related in the present novel [*The Fox-Magic Murders*] are entirely fictitious, however, and the other characters introduced imaginary. . . .

The three creeds of China were Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, the latter having been introduced into China from India in the first century A.D. Most officials were Confucianists with a sympathetic interest in Taoism, but largely anti-Buddhist. In the seventh century, however, a new Buddhist sect was introduced from India, which in China was called the Ch'an sect, and it absorbed many Taoist elements; it denied the Buddha as a saviour and declared all holy books useless, teaching that enlightenment must be found within one's own self. This doctrine was favoured by Chinese eclectic literati, and became popular also in Japan where it is known as Zen. . . .

Chinese fox-lore dates from before the beginning of our era, and throughout the ages figured largely in Chinese literature. For more information on fox-magic I refer to *The Religious System of China*, the monumental work by the Dutch sinologue Prof. J. J. M. de Groot, Volume V, Book 2, pp. 576-600 (E. J. Brill, Leyden, 1910).

In Judge Dee's time the Chinese did not wear pigtails. That custom was imposed upon them after 1644 A.D. when the Manchus had conquered China. The men did their hair up in a top-knot, and they wore caps both inside and outside the house, taking their head gear off only when going to bed. To confront another person with one's head uncovered was a grave insult, the only exception being Taoist recluses and Buddhist priests. . . .

In the T'ang dynasty the Chinese did not smoke. Tobacco and opium were introduced into China many centuries after Judge Dee's time.

—ROBERT VAN GULIK
Postscript to *The Fox-Magic Murders*,
Panther Books Ltd., 1973.