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OF TEMPLE PHANTOMS AND BELL MURDERS:
ON REPRESENTATIONS OF BUDDHISM IN
ROBERT VAN GULIK'S *JUDGE DEE MYSTERIES*

Western popular engagement with Buddhism grew dramatically in the last century. Religious icons for collection and display and representations in literature, art, and mass media such as film, television series and comic books, led to wider exposure to this Asian religious tradition. However, as Jane Iwamura has shown, this increased engagement did not affect patterns of representation.¹ In fact, in a mass-media environment, easy access to representations that meet Western spiritual and political needs of 'Asian religions' and 'Asians' only perpetuated existing stereotypes. As a result, modern and contemporary images of Buddhism in the West often echo the fascination and fear that have for centuries been associated with the concept of the Buddha as an 'Oriental idol,' or an object of both romanticization and suspicion.²

In this context, the Judge Dee mystery series written by Sinologist and diplomat Robert van Gulik (1910-1967) occupy a unique position. Composed and illustrated by an outstanding scholar of East Asian culture, these novels present a careful and nuanced take on Buddhism and Buddhist deities. This article focuses on three titles from the Judge Dee Mysteries: *The Chinese Bell Murders*, *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Phantom of the Temple*. In these three books, a Buddhist temple is the setting for stories about monks of dubious reputation, the smuggling of gold, and a phantom. I elaborate on the texts, as well as on the illustrations: what do the novels – through their protagonists' thoughts and actions – say about Buddhism? And, how do Van Gulik's illustrations compare to contemporaneous Western depictions? Van Gulik's stories and illustrations evidence a rare and much-needed sensitivity towards a cultural Other and their representation in a century in which some resisted Buddhism's influence or viewed its images as idols,³ while for others 'Zen' became a source of inspiration and an 'alternative lifestyle,' and mindfulness and martial arts movies and games gained enormous popularity.

***The Chinese Bell Murders*, *The Chinese Gold Murders*,
and Ming dynasty crime fiction**

The Chinese Bell Murders and its Dutch translation *Klokken van Kao-Yang* are Van Gulik's first Judge Dee mysteries and were published in 1958.⁴ He was inspired to write them while translating the late eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Wu Zetian si da qi' an* 武則天四大奇案 (*Four Great and Strange Cases from the Era of Empress Wu Zetian*), which features the Tang dynasty statesman Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630-700 CE), on whose character Judge Dee is based. Little is known about Di, and while his biography is part of the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (*Book of Tang*), a history

of the Tang dynasty (618-907) compiled in 941 CE, it does not include all cases. To devise his plots, Van Gulik would draw from stories from the crime fiction genre *gong' an xiaoshuo* 公案小說 (courtroom tales), popular in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, and he would complement his novels' texts with drawings of scenes constructed from Ming dynasty imagery.

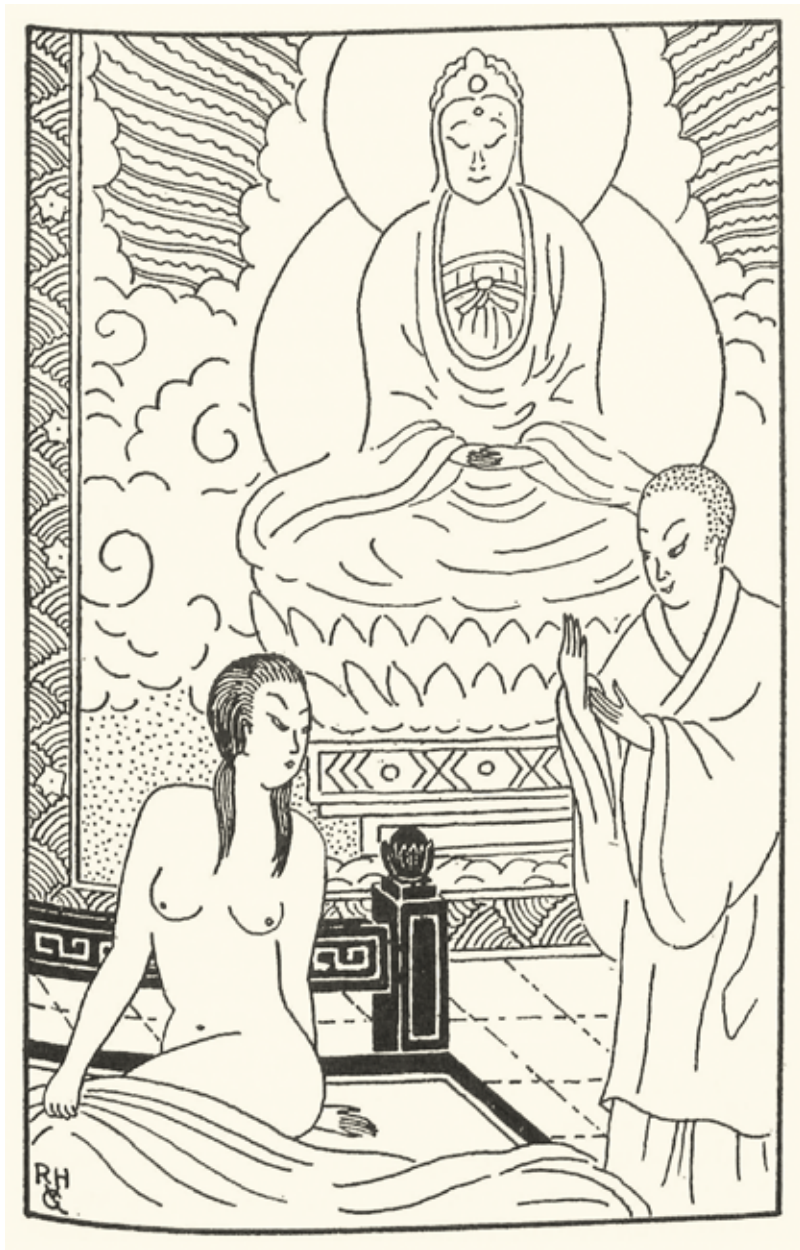
In *The Chinese Bell Murders*, Dee assumes a post in Poo-yang, a town in the south-eastern province of Jiangsu. The magistrate is presented with rumours about suspicious happenings in the Buddhist Temple of Boundless Mercy: women who are trying to conceive are asked to spend the night in this temple in front of a painting of the bodhisattva Guanyin and are later found to be miraculously pregnant. With the help of the prostitute Apricot, who visits the temple undercover, the judge is able to prove that the temple's monks are guilty of rape and has them all arrested.

Throughout the novel, the Buddhist temple is a site of intense, contrasting experiences. It is described as a locus of wealth, excess and sensuality: spacious courtyards surrounded by elegant reception rooms and gardens that lead to the great statue of Guanyin in the temple's main hall.⁵ This sandalwood statue is placed on a gilt pedestal amidst giant candles, golden incense burners and sacrificial vessels. The six pavilions in which the ladies are asked to spend the night are furnished with solid blackwood couches inlaid with mother-of-pearl, rosewood dressing-tables and fine porcelain tea sets. Each pavilion has a magnificent scroll painting on silk of Guanyin in full colour (fig. 1), and the air is heavy with perfume and incense. Yet, the same temple becomes a disconcerting place towards the end of the novel, when Dee turns one of its courtyards into a courtroom and orders the monks to be brought in for questioning: screams of terror resound through the air as those who resist questioning are beaten.

Similarly, in *The Chinese Gold Murders (Fantoom in Foe-lai* in Dutch), first published in 1959, the White Cloud Temple is an impressive site in Peng-lai, in the north-eastern province of Shandong.⁶ It has a marble entrance gate and a sandalwood statue of the Buddha Maitreya. Its abbot – dressed in purple silk and carrying a rosary of amber beads – is seated on a gold-embellished throne. However, it becomes clear that the temple's monks use another, deserted Buddhist temple to store large amounts of gold from Japan and Korea that they intend to smuggle to the capital inside a cedar copy of the Maitreya statue. When the judge asks to inspect this statue during its unveiling ceremony, the monks and audience run riot, and in the melee monks are wounded and the Maitreya statue is damaged, revealing its gold core.

In the two novels, Judge Dee and his assistants discuss Buddhism and have several encounters with the clergy. While in both stories there are characters who are genuinely interested in the faith, such as Dee's predecessor in Peng-lai, who was fascinated by Buddhist mysticism, and there are innocent monks, the majority of the encounters have a negative overtone. Abbots, priors and monks are generally shady characters. Trustworthy members of the clergy only show up at the end and perform no particular role in the stories, such as assisting the judge.

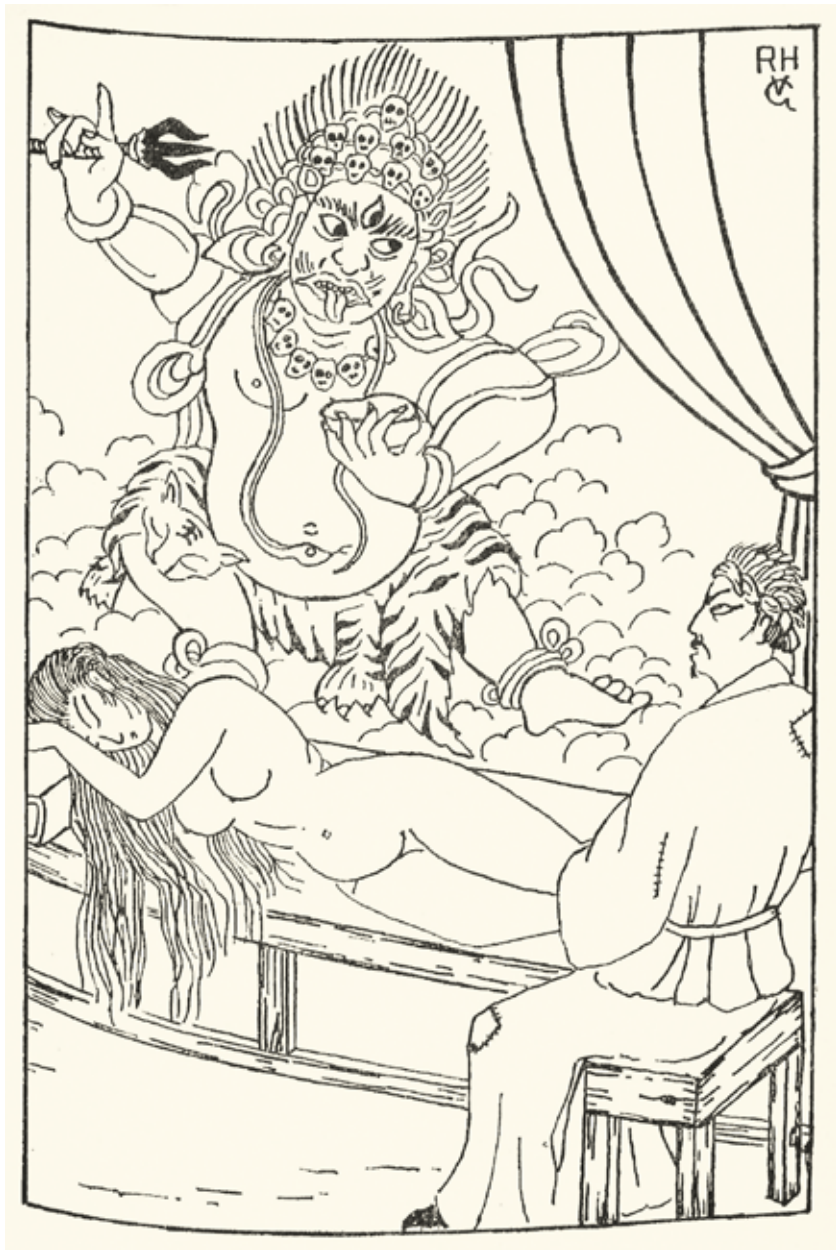
Fig. 1
 Robert van Gulik,
*Een Boeddhistische
 abt verrast een gast*
 (A Buddhist abbot
 surprises a guest).
 Illustration in *Klokken
 van Kao-Yang*, 1984,
 p. 136



The negative portrayal of the Buddhist clergy in crime fiction in China is not new. Junqing Wu discusses how in sixteenth-century Chinese crime fiction – Van Gulik’s main source – Buddhist monks were always suspected or convicted of crimes.⁷ Wu argues that the purpose of these stories was not to discredit the clergy. Rather, they fulfilled an increased market demand for a particular type of recreational literature in which Buddhist monks were the target of satire.⁸

Thus, in his portrayal of the Buddhist clergy, Van Gulik draws directly on Ming dynasty literature. However, contrary to Ming crime fiction, in

Fig. 2
Robert van Gulik,
*De gemalin van een
god (A god's spouse)*.
Illustration in *Het
spook in de tempel*,
1968, p. 63



which judges punish monks and nuns, in the three novels under discussion in this article, Judge Dee never passes verdict on the monks who commit crimes. In *The Chinese Bell Murders*, they are killed by an unruly mob, while in *The Chinese Gold Murders*, they are taken away. In Ming crime fiction, verdicts might include such punishments as ‘strokes of the cane,’ and while Wu demonstrates that the verdicts in this literature were often playful literary conceits rather than actual judicial sentences, the utter lack of any kind of ruling in the three Judge Dee novels is significant. It indicates a reluctance to pronounce judgment on specific clergy members, and, by extension, on Buddhism itself.

This is also clear from discussions between the judge and his assistants. For instance, early in *The Chinese Bell Murders*, the judge tells his lieutenant Tao Gan:

Personally, I will have no truck with the Buddhist crowd. I find myself completely satisfied with the wise teachings of our peerless Sage Confucius and his venerable disciples [...] Our Imperial Court however, in its august wisdom, has deemed that the Buddhist creed serves a purpose inasmuch as it ameliorates the morals of the common people, and therefore has extended its gracious protection to the Buddhist clergy and their temples. If they flourish, then this is in accordance with the Imperial Will, and we must carefully refrain from criticism!⁹

Indeed, throughout the remainder of the novel, the judge's approach to the religion is cautious and composed: when he sends Apricot undercover, he does not rule out the possibility of Guanyin's miraculous powers and instructs his agent to humbly prostrate herself on the floor should the deity appear to her. After the monks' arrest, he asks for help to protect them from the angry mob and goes from temple to temple to prevent further unrest. At the end of the novel, Dee declares that two of the temple's six pavilions did not have secret entrances, and the fact that women conceived during their stay at the temple should be taken as due to Guanyin's infinite grace and not be construed as casting doubt on the legitimacy of the subsequently born children – thereby honouring both the women and the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Vajrayāna Buddhism, *The Phantom of the Temple*, and Van Gulik's visual style

Judge Dee's overall reasonable and reserved approach to Buddhism is particularly striking in *The Phantom of the Temple*, first published in 1966 and translated into Dutch as *Het spook in de tempel*. The story unfolds in the remote district of Lan-fang, on the western borders of the Chinese empire. Lan-fang is populated by foreigners and nomads, and one of its main protagonists is Tala, a magician of Tartar descent. Tala is devoted to a ferocious deity of the pantheon of Vajrayāna or Esoteric Buddhism, whose temple she haunts (fig. 2). At several points in the novel, the judge expresses his abhorrence of her faith. He recognizes that the original Buddhist teachings are exalted, but refutes her deity of choice and form of worship. Images of the deity are described as 'monstrous' and the esoteric teachings as 'perverted.'¹⁰ Curiously though, he does not do anything about the deity's worship, unwilling to meddle in the Tartars' religious disputes. This is noteworthy, because according to Di Renjie's biography in the *Book of the Tang*, the magistrate was in fact involved in the large-scale suppression of local temples for popular deities.¹¹ Dee's remark at the end of *The Phantom of the Temple* is telling: when told by a former monk that Tala's ashes will turn into a white witch who will henceforth travel across the steppe with her god, the judge answers that while he cannot say that he believes this, he cannot say that he does not, thus maintaining the distance typical of his approach to Buddhism throughout the three books.

The detachment towards Buddhism that characterizes Dee in the stories can also be observed in the illustrations of Buddhist deities that accompany them. It is well known that Van Gulik copied his illustrations for the Judge Dee mysteries from Ming and Qing dynasty visual sources using traditional techniques in order to stay true to a 'genuine old Chinese style.'¹² Fan Lin argues that this 'genuine old style' is a calculated construction of a new visual narrative.¹³ She demonstrates how Van Gulik modified an interrogation scene in *The Chinese Nail Murders* by depicting the only female present in the nude, surrounded by fully-clothed men. Lin writes that while perhaps not distressing to contemporaneous readers, this choice, which cannot be traced back to Ming and Qing sources, 'objectifies the female body and legitimizes social and gender-related male dominance.'¹⁴ Indeed, the female nude is a recurring figure in the Judge Dee illustrations and is also central in the two scenes depicting Buddhist deities in *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Phantom of the Temple* (figs. 1 and 2). However, while using a female nude in these two scenes is not in keeping with traditional imagery, Van Gulik's drawings of the bodhisattva Guanyin (fig. 1) and the ferocious deity (fig. 2) compare well to extant images.

Fig. 3
Bodhisattva Guanyin,
 sandalwood with
 lacquer, h. 21.6 x
 w. 13.3 x d. 10.2 cm,
 China, 1624, The
 Metropolitan Museum
 of Art (Fletcher Fund,
 1936; accession
 no. 36.40a-e)



The Guanyin depicted in the background of figure 1 is supposed to be a scroll painting on silk in full colour. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) holds such a magnificent scroll, dated 1398, which features the bodhisattva seated on an elaborate throne.¹⁵ In terms of the visual characteristics and iconography of Guanyin, however, Van Gulik's drawing closely resembles a delightful small sculpture of Guanyin from 1624 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 3). It is a serene depiction of the bodhisattva seated in meditation on a lotus pedestal. The drawing of the ferocious deity in figure 2 is likely based on an image of the wrathful Vajrapāṇi, one of the most popular bodhisattvas of Vajrayāna Buddhism and a powerful protector of the religion (fig. 4). Like Vajrapāṇi, the deity in figure 4 has a furious expression, wears a tiger loincloth, has a snake around his neck, and holds a vajra in his right hand. In the case of both deities, Van Gulik's precise rendering evidences a thoughtful, analytic attitude towards the religion and its visual forms. The visual attention given to the images, combined with the consideration expressed by the judge in the texts, allow the reader to question what is seen.

On representation: images and conventionalized narratives

Lavinia Benedetti writes that Van Gulik's translation of *Four Great and Strange Cases from the Era of Empress Wu Zetian* and the Judge Dee series it inspired are instruments through which he 'constructed' Chinese culture for Western readers.¹⁶ She argues that the preface of his translation of the eighteenth-century novel introduces the Western reader to a 'Chinese cultural context,' through a list of rules that explain how Chinese detective fiction differs from the Western genre. This list is simultaneously a 'set of traits,' for instance when Van Gulik describes how 'the Chinese have an innate love for the supernatural' or that 'they are a leisurely people with a passionate interest for detail.'¹⁷ Yet, Benedetti also recognizes Van Gulik's intention to 'resist against Western preconceptions of "Chineseness," in favor of a more [...] flexible understanding of Chinese identity,'¹⁸ which becomes clear from his explanation for the translation:

For many years, Western writers of detective novels have time and again introduced the Chinese Element in their books. The mysteries of China itself or of the Chinatowns in some foreign cities, were often chosen as a means of lending a weird and exotic atmosphere to the plot. [...] As the Chinese have been so often represented – and too often misrepresented! – in our popular crime literature, it seems only just that they themselves be allowed to have their own say for once in this field.¹⁹

The Judge Dee mysteries are calculated textual and visual constructions; however, in the case of images of Buddhism, Van Gulik's sensitivity towards representations of a cultural Other, as reflected in the above quote, and his deep knowledge of East Asian culture, combine to form a nuanced representation – a rarity at a time of widespread captivation with Asian religions. An extreme example of the opposite is the US detective series *Secret Service*, published as a weekly magazine between 1899-1925.²⁰ In this series, US Secret Service agents track down criminals in stories that are often based in Chinatown and feature 'horrible old Chinese idols,'



Fig. 4
Thangka showing Vajrapāṇi (detail), linen, 135 x 92.8 cm,
China/Tibet, 20th century, Stichting Nationaal Museum
van Wereldculturen (inv. no. RV-2740-53)

SECRET SERVICE

OLD AND YOUNG KING BRADY, DETECTIVES.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post-Office, March 1, 1899, by Frank Tracy.

No. 500.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 21, 1908.

Price 5 Cents.

THE BRADYS AND THE CHINESE IDOL; OR, THE CLEW FOUND IN PELL STREET. *By A NEW-YORK DETECTIVE.*



While the Chinamen were chattering excitedly, the big fellow suddenly got a move on. Seizing a hatchet, he went for the idol on the little altar, pushing the priest to one side. The Bradys and Alice made no attempt to interfere.

Fig. 5
A New York Detective,
cover of *The Bradys*
and the *Chinese Idol* or
the *Clew found in Pell*
Street, 1908, p. 1

such as 'luck gods' on 'dinky little altars.'²¹ These 'idols' are part of criminal practices such as smuggling, or are located in the vicinity of the villain or crime scene (fig. 5). In both text and image, *Secret Service* draws upon racialized imagery and stereotypes, and its depiction of the Buddha and Buddhism is often not far removed from earlier European portrayals of the Buddha as an 'Oriental idol,' as compiled by Donald Lopez.²²

Secret Service is undeniably popular crime literature of a different category, aimed at a particular audience, and produced at a specific time and in a specific region. However, what is at stake here is not a 'true' or 'false' image of Buddhism and its followers, but the question of how images perform roles. In her analysis of the phenomenon of the 'Oriental Monk,' Jane Iwamura outlines how personalities such as Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), the figurehead of the Zen Buddhist movement in the West, appeal to a Western audience's spiritual and political needs through their image.²³ In photographs from the 1950s, the intellectual Suzuki, dressed in Japanese attire, becomes the 'venerable eastern sage,' who 'romantically recalls an ancient and distant Japan.'²⁴ In magazines, he is 'Zen's embodiment,' and both are understood as 'stylized,' 'approachable,' and 'chic.'²⁵ Iwamura writes that this construct was prompted by Cold War politics and US interests in global markets: after World War II, Suzuki's image helped to 're-present' the Japanese to Americans. Once Zen's popularity was established in the US in the late 1950s however, that country became the site of its development, and articles and images brought the status of Zen in Japan into question. Therefore, for Iwamura, the 'Oriental Monk' is a conventionalized narrative, whose image follows certain Orientalist protocols and masks political ideologies. He is celebrated for what he represents, rather than what he has to say, and his audience is less concerned with the distinctiveness of the tradition, and more with the desire the monk meets. This is why, in the late 1990s, previous variations of the 'Oriental Monk' could easily be 'traded in' for the image of the Dalai Lama.

Increased access to and engagement with representations of Buddhism intensified such behaviour. Indeed, the popular use of 'Zen' in language, imagery, and branding to describe a transcultural phenomenon that applies to everything from a 'cool lifestyle' to electronics, cosmetics, and salads is another important example.²⁶ While the processes that have led to Zen's popularity might seem contrary to those that influenced the creation of *Secret Service*, in both case studies, patterns of representation, and roles of images as catering to particular spiritual and political needs, are similar. In fact, Iwamura argues, 'positive' images make it harder to challenge and see constructions.

In this series of modern and contemporary images of Buddhism, Van Gulik's stories and illustrations are refreshing. In both text and image, Buddhism in the Judge Dee mysteries is a well-considered part of the plot. Throughout the novels, Van Gulik's drawings hew to traditional images, while his main protagonist maintains a certain distance towards the religion, offering the reader a space to contemplate what Buddhism is and what its images might mean.

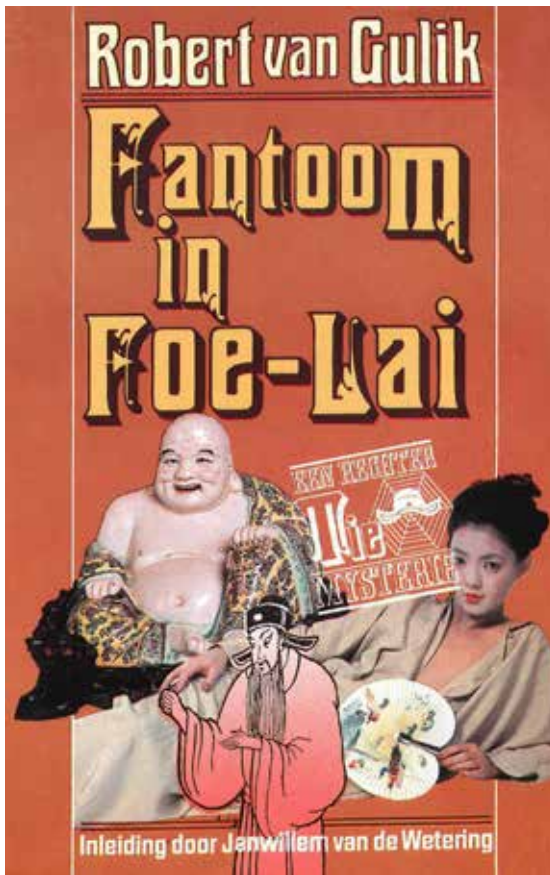


Fig. 6 (left)
Elsevier book cover of
Fantom in Foe-Lai, 1979

Fig. 7 (below)
Overamstel book cover of
Het spook in de tempel, 2015



A comparison of the covers of the novels from different decades might best highlight the uniqueness of this creation. Van Gulik was deeply involved with his book covers as well and in the 1960s his illustrations were used for them. After the author's death, in the late 1970s through 1980s, Elsevier publishers decided on a somewhat haphazard design (fig. 6): Thomas van Gulik, the author's son, explained how the publisher suggested a combination of 'a Chinese object, a woman, and the Judge Dee logo [Van Gulik's illustration of the judge]' and how he would sometimes assist the designer, Nico Dresmé, in the search for a suitable 'Chinese object.'²⁷

As can be seen in figure 6, for the cover of the Dutch version of *The Chinese Gold Murders*, *Fantom in Foe-lai*, they chose a sculpture of the eccentric monk Budai from the Kangxi period (1662-1672), currently in the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. In the context of images and patterns of representation, Elsevier's peculiar suggestion of 'a Chinese object and a woman' takes us away from Van Gulik's careful consideration and straight into the trap of a conventionalized narrative of 'China,' through images of replaceable objects and bodies that serve particular needs. The culmination of this conventionalized narrative can perhaps be found in the most recent series of the mysteries, published by Overamstel (fig. 7). Their cover of the Dutch version of *The Phantom of the Temple*, *Het spook in de*

tempel, is a Shutterstock image of a ‘Zen Buddhist temple’ by Dariush M.²⁸ It is not clear from the Shutterstock website which temple this is, but related keywords include ‘Japan,’ ‘China,’ ‘oriental,’ ‘peaceful,’ ‘calm,’ ‘contemplation’ and ‘east.’ While this cover will undoubtedly attract many readers, it is a far cry from Van Gulik’s call to see, think, and challenge.

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NOTES

1 Iwamura 2011.

2 Lopez 2016.

3 For example, in their research on Buddhism in The Netherlands, Poorthuis and Salemink write how both Protestant and Catholic communities resisted the religion’s influence in the early 20th century; Poorthuis & Salemink 2009.

4 For an extensive overview of and additional information on all the Judge Dee mysteries, please see <http://www.rechttertje.nl/welkom/index.jsp>.

5 Van Gulik 1977, pp. 61-62.

6 Van Gulik 1979.

7 Wu 2019.

8 Wu 2019, p. 585.

- 9 Van Gulik 1977, pp. 44-45.
- 10 Van Gulik 1968, pp. 59 and 66.
- 11 Benedetti 2017, p. 614.
- 12 Van Gulik 2003 quoted in Lin 2020, p. 33.
- 13 Lin 2020.
- 14 Lin 2020, p. 36.
- 15 See: <https://collections.lacma.org/node/199149>.
- 16 Benedetti 2014.
- 17 Benedetti 2014, p. 28.
- 18 Benedetti 2014, p. 29.
- 19 Van Gulik 1976 quoted in Benedetti 2014, p. 29.
- 20 Samples from the series may be found at: <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/secret-service>. I am grateful to Peter Romaskiewicz for drawing my attention to this source.
- 21 *A New York Detective* 1908, pp. 3, 11 and 19.
- 22 Lopez 2016.
- 23 Iwamura 2011, Chapter 2.
- 24 Iwamura 2011, pp. 26-27.
- 25 Iwamura 2011, pp. 25 and 34.
- 26 For examples, see Irrizarry 2015.
- 27 Information provided by Thomas van Gulik, 2021.
- 28 Information provided by Overamstel, 2021. For the image, see <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/zen-buddhist-temple-20826940>. The same image is used across the Shutterstock site with a variety of titles, including 'Buddhist zen temple at misty night.'