

Great Waves of a Long Life

Marco Huysmans; photos courtesy of Shi Ye and Pauline van Gulik

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On 21 November, a special event was held at the famous *Three Gorges Museum* in Chongqing. This city played a major part in the life of Robert van Gulik: it was the scene of his first period in China which later turned out to be the only one. It was where he met Shui Shih-fang, where they married, and where their first son Willem was born in 1944. Seventy years later, the city honours him by dedicating part of their museum to his memory: a special exhibition titled *Recollection of Old Stories in Chongqing*.

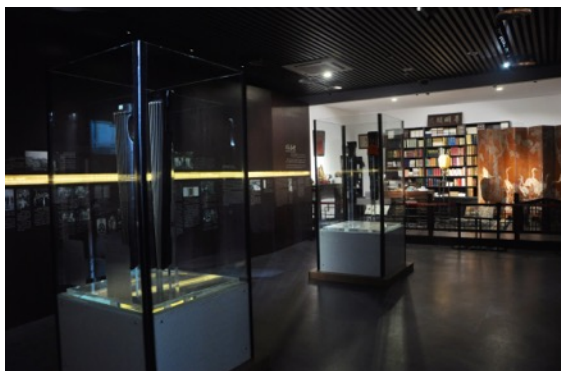
Study

It consists mainly of a replica of his study. The Van Gulik donated many items to make it as

real as possible, including the famous Lacquer Screen which inspired Van Gulik to write the Judge Dee story of that name.

The study is located at the end of a wide corridor with two glass showcases in the middle. These showcases contain two *qins*, the ancient Chinese lute which Robert van Gulik studied extensively and played rather well himself. Along the side, a brightly lit timeline marks the major events in his life. It is titled *Great Waves of a Long Life – Robert van Gulik’s Life and Achievements in Sinology*. Under the timeline the events are described and illustrated by many photographs.

On the next page you find the part of the text about the study exactly as it appears in the exhibition.





Following the Clouds to This Land

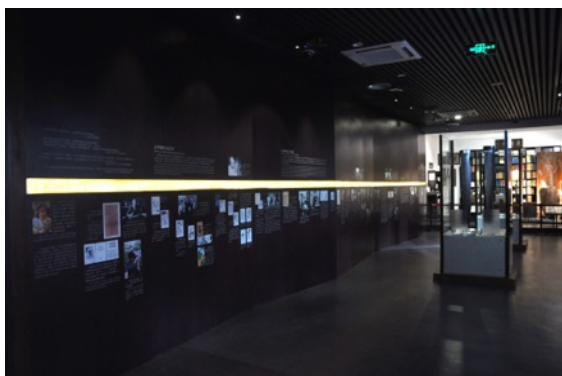
Robert van Gulik designed his Chinese style study himself, known as a sacred space in his mind. He decorated the space as a paradise of Chinese culture with Chinese furniture, relics, books, calligraphies and paintings, sculptures and music instruments collected from East Asia. Here he practiced calligraphy and painting, played the Chinese lute and researched a wealth of ancient Chinese files and records. Swiftly his roles constantly as a diplomat, a sinologist and a writer, he enjoyed his own “free time” as he wished.

Robert van Gulik named his study according to the Chinese scholars’ traditional way and each change of name stands for an unforgettable event in his life. In 1936, he named his study in Tokyo as *Ji-yi-zhai* (Hall of Loyalty), containing a reference *Ji-yi-hang* (Society of Loyalty), a Dutch Commercial society in Guangzhou during the 19th century. In 1941, he named a room full of Chinese music files and records in his house in Tokyo the *Zhong He Qin Room*.

In 1943, he arrived in Chongqing. In memory of the collections ruined in the war, he named his small study in Chongqing as *You-cun-an* (Room of Survival), which means that “Faith

will always survive in the ruins of relics”. His first study in Chongqing was at a wartime guesthouse called the *Victory House* (now Chong-bin International Plaza in Yuzhong District). In September 1943, shortly after his engagement with Miss Shui Shih-fang, he and his fiancée participated in a mid-autumn meeting of scholars in Chongqing and changed the name of his study room from *You-can-an* to *Yin-yue-an* (Hermitage where one Sings to the Moon). The name of *Yin-yue-an* lasted for ten years. In December of 1943, he moved from the Building of Victory House to No. 295 Guofo Lu (now Renmin Lu). In 1953, Robert van Gulik worked in New Delhi, India as Counsellor at the Dutch Embassy and he changed the name of his study to *Zun-ming-ge* (Room for Respecting Ming). Here Ming had two meanings: one is the brightness all people dreamed for, and the other is the Chinese culture during the Ming Dynasty which he appreciated most. The name remained until Robert van Gulik’s death.

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Shi Ye is joined by Chen Lai-yan 陈来元,
the first Chinese translator of the Judge Dee novels