

The case of the strange *Spring Dream*

Piet Rombouts

Recently I have acquired a little book titled 春梦琐言 *Trifling Tale of a Spring Dream*. This book was published by Robert van Gulik in Tokyo in 1950 in a limited edition of only two hundred copies, together with a book case. My copy, however, is not one of these two hundred early prints.

An inscription in Chinese on the last page states that in May 1976 five more copies have been made in The Hague and issued by a certain Mr. Rudy K. My copy is number 205, in all probability the last of these five, and is without book case. It seems unlikely that these five replications were issued with a bookcase.

Chinese binding

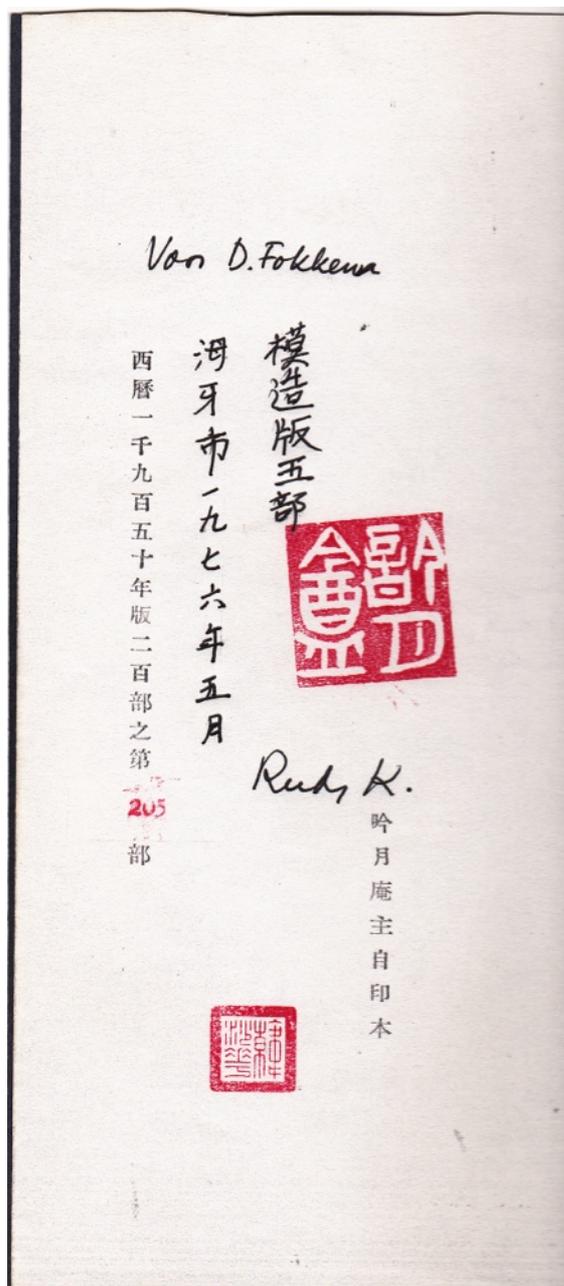
The five copies appear to have been made on basis of a photocopy of an original edition. The photocopying was done in such a way that the copied sheets could be folded and sewn together with thread, in a way quite identical to the traditional Chinese binding of the original publication. The book size of the replication is about 1 cm broader and one cm shorter. The upper part of the pages of the replication shows poor craftsmanship as it was cut off in an uneven manner. A blue cover was added, with on the front page a white vertical slip of paper giving the Chinese title and publisher (Gao Luopei). The Chinese seal in the left bottom corner on this slip was given some red colouring, to increase its likeness to an original seal imprint.

Unfortunately, the glass-plate of the copying machine was a little smudged and had not been thoroughly cleansed before the photocopies were produced. This has resulted in a dark blot half a centimeter in length near the left margin of almost every uneven-numbered page, and near the right margin of many even-numbered pages. The English and Chinese text is throughout very readable, albeit a bit light in color.

Cunning

The last page (cf. image) features the following: an inscription in Chinese 模造版五部 'replication in five copies', thus constituting a blatant admission of committing forgery; a stamped book number in red; and a red seal in Chinese 吟月庵 'hermitage where one sings to the moon', one of the many seals used by Van Gulik. Comparison with an original copy of the book kept in Leiden University Library shows that the seal is modeled after the original seal imprint, but even cursory visual inspection reveals that some lines deviate in thickness and

curving from the original. Hence, by conspiring to have a seal specially carved it is clear that Rudy K. went out of his way to perpetrate a cunning forgery, and this shows his malicious intent. The seal was affixed not at a right angle with the page, but rather slanting and therefore producing an overall result that is not pleasing to the eye, exposing the inexperience of Rudy K. in handling seals. Finally, on this page is still another Chinese seal, certainly belonging to Rudy K, and this may prove to be a valuable clue to his identity. The seal consists of three characters, the first two of which are tentatively identified as 韓松 'Han Song', the third still awaits recognition.



法官狄

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Proposed course of action

Instruct Tao Gan to conduct an investigation into the true identity of the forger. His background as a swindler will be of advantage in tackling this case. However, Mr. Tao should be supervised in case he himself was the forger.

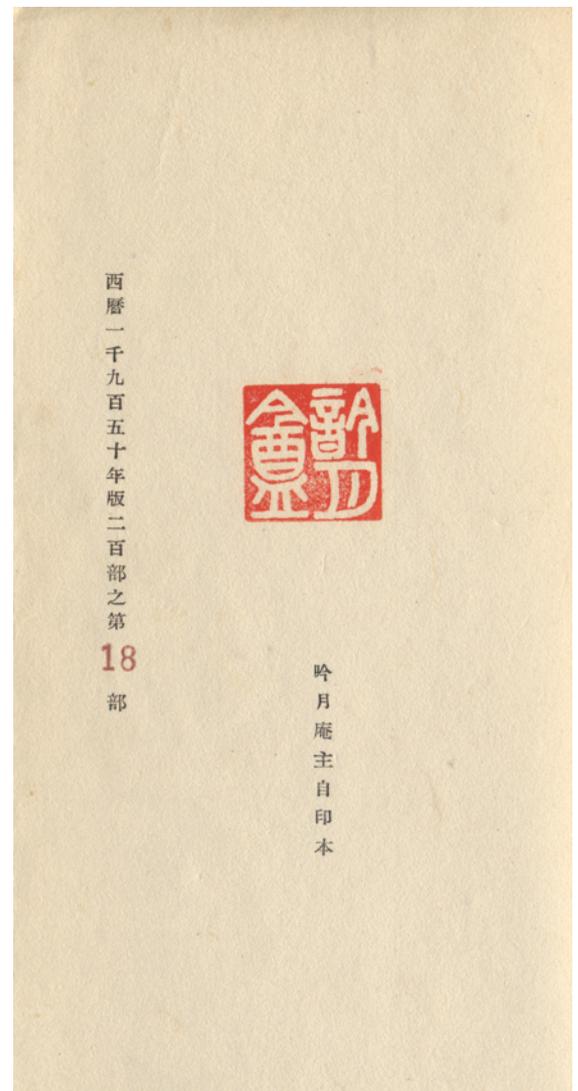
The task of supervising the progress of the investigation can be undertaken by Sergeant Hoong, who is still recuperating from a nasty stab wound he suffered in Pei-chow (also known as Ning-tsjö), but who is dying to be on the job again.

When the initial results of the investigation are known Ma Joong should be brought into play to add some muscle into the investigation and assist the identified suspect in confessing his crime.

Postscript by the editor

A little bird tells me that as we speak someone is translating the biography *Een man van drie levens* in English. I don't know for sure who the translator is, but I do know who Carl Barkman would have preferred for the job. He told me in August 2006: "Ook Leentje de Vries [...] meende dat de echtgenote van Rudy Kousbroek, sinologe en van geboorte Engelstalig, de ideale vertaalster zou zijn." Which means: "Leentje de Vries too [...] thought that the wife of Rudy Kousbroek, being a sinologue and native speaker of English, would be the ideal translator."

What this all has to do with the case of the strange *Spring Dream* is left as an exercise to the reader.



Images on this page are scans of the copy of *Leiden University Library* mentioned above

高羅佩

