The Transcultural Construction of a Historical Chinese Murder Case: The Ninefold Murder

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Abstract. This article explores the cross-cultural adaptations of a historical Chinese murder case. Focusing on three key texts published by An He in 1809, Wu Jianren in 1904, and Robert van Gulik in 1958, it investigates the potential of historicity to be used by authors of crime fiction to address concerns of their own times.

In History Meets Fiction, Beverley Southgate suggested that history and fiction are indeed “inextricably intertwined” (x). While historians throughout the twentieth century have been cut off “from the social and political realities of their time” in pursuit of ideological detachment and a “scientific” and “objective” account of history, it was writers of fiction who first offered “a critique of ‘detached’ history” (98). According to Southgate, it is writers of fiction and dramatists who can utilize history in political and ethical contexts and inject dimensions into their subjects that “make more widely accessible . . . such key issues in historical theory as those concerning truth, relativism, memory, ethics and identity” (xi). The present research endeavors to explore this function of fiction in representing history in the genre of historical crime fiction, a field that remains understudied.

Focusing on the three stages of the adaptive trajectory across time and cultures of a historical murder case that occurred in eighteenth-century China, this study explores the potential for historicity to be utilized by authors of crime fiction to offer insights into their own times.

In 1727, a group of bandits robbed the Liang family from Panyu in Guangdong

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