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The Janus-Faced Clergy Crimes in the Judge Dee Mysteries: A Pentadic Criticism

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Abstract: Robert Van Gulik, one of the twentieth century's most prominent sinologists and detective writers, has made significant contributions to the study of Chinese cultures but received inadequate scholarly appraisal until the twenty-first century. Although Van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries have been well received informally among ordinary readers and scholars, little academic attention has been devoted to Judge Dee's trials of evil clergy due to their covert representation in Van Gulik's narration. This paper pays attention to crimes committed by religious leaders and members of orders to reveal an implicit religion-crime relationship in Van Gulik's works on Judge Dee with the help of Kenneth Burke's pentadic criticism. In our analysis, we find that Van Gulik differentiates between good and evil disciples, the acts of the disciples and the beliefs of religions, and non-mainstream and orthodox religion, presenting a heterogeneous religious crime landscape. As a result, in the misdeeds of clergy and offenses against the sacred religion, a Janus-faced (two-faced) clergy crime is identified in the mysteries.

Keywords: crime and religion; Judge Dee; Van Gulik; pentadic criticism; Chinese courtroom fiction



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1. Introduction

Robert Van Gulik (1910–1967) was among the most famous sinologists and detective writers of the twentieth century. As a veritable polymath, Van Gulik has made key contributions to the study of Chinese culture, including the Chinese lute, Chinese pictorial art, and sexual life in ancient China, an initial survey but a pioneering work on the curtailed erotic pursuits in imperial China. But Van Gulik is most well-known among ordinary readers for his writings on the Judge Dee¹ mysteries (Huang 2022). During the Second World War, Van Gulik translated the eighteenth-century Chinese detective fiction of Dee Gong An [狄公案] into English under the title *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, from which he celebrated the merits and power of Chinese detective fiction. To challenge the fame of third-rate Western thrillers enjoyed in the Far East and to recall “some of the wisdom of old China” (Roggendorf 1968, p. vi), (Van Gulik 1997a, p. v) was stimulated to write “a detective novel in [the] traditional Chinese style” that would appeal to both modern Oriental and Western readers. The *Mysteries* consist of fourteen novels, two novellas, and eight stories, comprising sixteen Judge Dee books published in English during the 1950s and 1960s.² (Van Dover 2015) divides the *Mysteries* into four groups: the first series (five lengthy narratives), the second (seven novels, two novellas, and eight short stories), the third (two novels), and the new series (two volumes). Van Dover finds that there is a gradual reduction of the traditional practice of Chinese detectives whenever Van Gulik begins a new series, such as removing the summary couplet at the beginning of each chapter or abandoning the practice of having the detective solve three cases concurrently. Despite the changes in form or formula, Van Gulik's stories set the background of the criminal cases in Tang Dynasty China in the eighteenth century.

As an influential and prolific novelist among early- to mid-twenty-century sinophiles, Van Gulik has been avidly read but received little scholarly appraisal until the twenty-first

century. Most studies of the series are often accompanied by an investigation of Van Gulik's prefaces and postscripts, as well as his academic works. They are part of a comparative perspective, as Van Gulik has often incorporated elements and formulas from both Western and Chinese detective fiction. Some studies generalize and examine Van Gulik's reinventions of both literary traditions (Wei 2009, 2022; Huang 2022; Van Dover 2015; Hao 2016), while others are interested in the veracity of the Chinese-ness of the stories given in a "foreigner's" works by delving further into Van Gulik's representation of Chinese culture (for example, into supernatural elements, Confucius thoughts, and Taoist cultures) (Zhang and Zhang 2009; Tang 2017; Wang 2018, 2019). Although most of the existing studies pay attention to Van Gulik's absorption of Chinese elements, such as composing techniques and ancient Chinese texts, few have focused on a particular issue, such as the religion-crime relations, in these novels and examined it through critical textual analysis.

Believing in language's constitution of action, Burke ([1945] 1969) develops his five key elements of human relations—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—from his theory of dramatism to examine statements about human motives. The pentad, thus, is intended as a way of analyzing, not actual human behavior but only descriptions of behavior. This method system, unifying rhetoric and poetic in a single analytical framework, assists us in understanding the philosophical basis of the author's motivational terminology by investigating his/her descriptions of human behaviors. Therefore, with the help of Burke's pentadic criticism, this study fills in the gap by focusing on Van Gulik's descriptions of criminal acts committed by members of religious orders and organizations (Buddhist monks, nuns, Taoists, and disciples of non-mainstream religions) in his Judge Dee series. In so doing, we contend that Van Gulik's goal was to uphold the integrity of religion by assigning wrongdoings solely to the clergy so that the Janus-faced clergy crime was adopted in his crime fiction to portray the relationship between crime and religion.

2. Religion and Crime in the Western and Chinese Detective Fiction

Literary studies have recently drawn upon detective stories to investigate and understand the relationship between religion and crime. The collection *Christianity and the Detective Story*, edited by Morlan and Raubichek (2013a), offers fifteen articles exploring the interactions between the two elements. Absorbing diverse materials, including religious aspects, can essentially broaden the dimension of detective writings. Scholars such as Ahlquist (2013) and Morlan and Raubichek (2013b) contend that detective fiction can serve as a well-situated and appealing forum for discussing theological thought. Roughly, they generalize six reasons. The first two concern the similarities between religion and detective stories. Both aim at restoring order, justice, and morality through judgment and puzzle-solving—but religion is based on the faith in the supernatural in seeking truth and detective stories on practical reason in tracking criminal cases. The other four are mainly about the function of religion: converting criminals instead of crushing them, comforting suffering where the detective is unable to solve them, helping vulnerable detectives who are not omnipotent and self-sufficient, functioning as the ultimate and unsolved mystery and indicating that not all crimes can be solved through reason.

The canonical combination of Christian elements with crimes in fiction may date back to the products of twentieth-century genius G. K. Chesterton, and the form continues to flourish in the twenty-first century. Bill Phillips (Phillips 2014) is keenly aware of the changes in this form of writing. The traditional detective replaces the role of prophets (of priests or God's representative) in which the detective becomes a seemingly omnipotent man capable of "ascribing meaning to the otherwise random minutiae of existence" (Cusack 2005, p. 161). However, the investigators now have flaws and limitations, recognizing themselves as "agent of redemption" (Phillips 2014, p. 140). This change is attributed to "the heterogeneous and diverse nature of religious belief in Western society" and the tastes of the authors; they are inclined to create "hard-drinking, invincible, solitary detectives" who are often unable to solve cases on their own (ibid., p. 148). Despite the change, we notice a uniformity in this Christianity-involved detective fiction, which

implicitly depicts that religion can suppress, mitigate, or solve a crime, as it has so much space in which to present its positive effects: comforting the victims, helping the detectives, and, most importantly, saving the souls of the criminals.

Uncovering the relationship between religion and crime is not new in China. The Late Ming period (the sixteenth century) saw a flowering of the Buddhist clergy in *gong'an xiaoshuo* [公案小說] (courtroom fiction), in which “the role of a detective is always played by the magistrate of the district where crime occurred” (Van Gulik 1997b, p. 313). Nevertheless, unlike Christianity-involved detective fiction, where religious beliefs are often shared by detectives and those in need of help, courtroom fiction directly portrays numerous clergy, mostly Buddhist monks, who are convicted of crimes. Oki Yasushi (Yasushi 2012, p. 212) labels this group *evil Buddhist monks* [惡僧] and classifies their evildoings in two categories: “a real crime such as murder, rape, abduction” and “a violation of the commandments within the world of Buddhist monks.” Kaite Chang (Chang 2018) finds that the stories of evil monks occupy nearly a tenth of the stories in the 12 collections of courtroom fiction from the Ming dynasty. Studies inquiring about the reasons for this preference also explain the answers at social and individual levels. Yasushi attributes it to the Will of Emperor Jiajing [嘉靖帝], who worshiped Taoism and persecuted Buddhism. Chang (2018) argues that the depiction of evil monks is a warning of (potential) social chaos caused by religion as an increase of people of low quality and moral standards became Buddhists, as Buddhism was moving towards secularization or vulgarization in the Ming dynasty.³ Both Lin (2003) and Van Gulik (1977) regard the evil-monk stories as a collective act by the Confucian literary class, who called for a restoration of social morality by criticizing and distaining Buddhism. According to Lin and Van Gulik, these stories are considered a mirror of social reality, building a connection between religion (Buddhism) and crime so that ideological, political, or moral lessons can be told and a moral purpose fulfilled. Yet, scholars like Wu (2019, p. 586) insist that the negative portrayal of monks comes from a burgeoning demand for this literary convention “rather than a window onto social reality.”

3. The Evil Clergy in the Judge Dee Mysteries

As we mentioned above, Van Gulik (1977) believed that the Confucian literary class, who held prejudice against religion, notably Buddhism, was the driving force in history for writing the Chinese courtroom novels about evil clergy. He then followed this tradition in his first attempt at an ancient Chinese detective novel, *The Chinese Bell Murders*, in 1950, portraying Dee, a judge who revered Confucianism. However, it was rejected by a Japanese publisher who believed an unfavorable description of Buddhism might be disrespectful;⁴ this manuscript remained in the closet until it was published in a Japanese periodical, *Tante-Kurabu*, in 1955 (Van Gulik 2021, p. 236). Though Van Gulik made an astute response to the Japanese market and stopped featuring villain monks as the main characters in his second novel, *The Chinese Maze Murder* (1950), he never stopped portraying evil clergy in his later fiction. Part of the reason is that, since 1958, his fiction began to be sold in places outside Japan (Hague, London, and Kuala Lumpur). These miscreants share different identities (monk, nun, prior, abbot, and abbess) and religious backgrounds (Buddhism, Taoism, and Tantrism). A close reading of the sixteen Judge Dee books reveals that seven cases feature crimes committed by clergy (See Table 1).

A majority of the transgressions are organized crimes; for example, Hui-pen, the prior of the White Cloud Temple in *The Chinese Gold Murder*, confederated with Korean monks to smuggle gold from Korea into China and organized subordinates, itinerant monks to carry gold in their walking sticks to their transmission den, the backyard of the Temple. The seduction and rape in *The Chinese Bell Murder* are other results of organized crime, where monks at a lower echelon are the principals of the felony. Most of these crimes are committed by clergy in a high position (abbot, abbess, prior). As the Buddhist clergy has its ecclesiastical hierarchy (or system of dominance) and the Buddhist temple is structured as a closed house for clergies, it is often difficult to organize a serious crime without the involvement of top clergy unless they are murdered or walled up in a cellar as in the cases

of *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Phantom of The Temple*. Nearly all offenses by members of religious organizations are committed in the temples. However, in Van Gulik's stories, many other criminal offenses are committed in the temples, and the clergy is not involved. These misdeeds include murder, kidnapping, and rape, and these victims include ladies, married women, and young and middle-aged men, the pillars of strength in society. This writing is in accordance with the convention of *gong'an xiaoshuo*, where temples that are supposed to be the place of purifying souls become the scene of crimes (Lin 2003, p. 154). Lin argues that by symbolizing the temple as a dangerous place in the late Ming novels, people would lose their confidence and restrain their fantasy about religion.

Table 1. Crimes by Clergy in the Judge Dee Mysteries.

| Title | Character | Crime |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| <i>The Chinese Gold Murders</i> | Hui-pen (prior of the White Cloud Temple) and his itinerant monks | smuggled gold from Korea to the imperial capital, used the Temple as the transfer den |
| <i>The Chinese Lake Murders</i> | a roaming monk | kidnapped and mistreated a young man. |
| <i>The Chinese Bell Murders</i> | Spiritual Virtue (abbot of the Temple of Boundless Mercy) and a group of confederate monks | seduced and forced the barren wives, who pray to the Buddhist goddess to bear children, to have sex with them, blackmailed the victims; bribed the judge |
| <i>The Chinese Maze Murders</i> | three monks | a fraudulent accusation of a theft |
| <i>The Haunted Monastery</i> | True Wisdom (abbot of the Monastery) | stole a large sum of money from the monastery's treasury as a prior |
| | SUN Ming (a Taoist sage) | seduced women who wished to enter religion; murdered three of them; murdered Jade Mirror, former abbot, when he was suspected of the crimes; murdered True Wisdom. |
| <i>The Phantom of The Temple</i> | Mrs. CHANG (abbess of the Temple of the Purple) | suspected of stealing the fifty bars of gold intended to be used by the imperial capital to pay the Khan of the Tartars and of murdering victims in order to appropriate the stolen gold |
| <i>Poets and Murder</i> | The Monk (later the head of the beggars) Yoo-lan (a Taoist nun and poetess) | blackmailed the criminals. whipped her maid to death. |

Sources: The Judge Dee mysteries (Van Gulik 1960, 1977, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2004, 2010).

Van Gulik's detective stories violate the traditional practice of Christianity-involved detective fiction in that believers are often criminals who do not hold religion's optimism or holy spirit. These stories also differ from their traditional Chinese sources in many aspects. For example, some female or Taoist disciples in the stories are depicted as criminals.⁵ Though it is suspicious to attribute an eruption of evil in clergy members to the fixation of Van Gulik's literary interests, not as controversial as illustrations of nude Chinese females for the stories, many plots evidence the power of religious membership (the Buddhism in *The Chinese Bell Murders*, Taoism in *The Hunted Monastery*) in the Imperial Court. It nevertheless indicates Van Gulik's reaction to the social reality around him, not a mirror of his ideological, political, or moral purpose. Paramita Paul (2022) notices that Van Gulik's narrative of the criminal disciples is mysterious: There is always a lack of a passage that describes Judge Dee's verdict, contrary to Ming crime fiction, in which the judges punish the villains.

Van Gulik is fully aware of this tradition, "[A] Chinese sense of justice demands that the punishment meted out to the criminal should be set forth in full detail" (Van Gulik 1977, p. 285). And in some scenes when crimes by clergy were unveiled, Judge Dee would explain his decision to open a court session. For example, in the eighteenth chapter of *The Chinese Bell Murders*, when the miscreants were identified, Judge Dee announced that "As to these criminals, I shall interrogate them during the afternoon session in the tribunal, and there they shall be allowed to speak for themselves and confess their crimes" (ibid., p. 196).

However, the trial is barely presented to readers, which "indicates a reluctance to pronounce judgment on specific clergy members and, by extension, on Buddhism itself," says

Paul (2022, p. 9). Moreover, Paul argues that Van Gulik's narrative and Judge Dee's approach to religion are "cautious and composed" when the crimes of the clergy are unveiled (ibid., p. 10). Van Gulik indeed conceals the punishment of criminal clergy; however, he depicts their crimes in full at the end of the stories.

Through demystifying Van Gulik's narration on Judge Dee's process, a pentadic criticism (see below) of the disclosure of crimes will demonstrate how Van Gulik maintains the integrity of religion, particularly mainstream religion while cracking down on the crimes of religious villains.

4. Pentadic Criticism of Clergy Crimes in Judge Dee Mysteries

Burke's ([1945] 1969) pentadic criticism, rooted in dramatism, examines how language systems, whether philosophical, political, literary, or religious, describe and affect human motives. From the standpoint of drama, to trace how attitudes and motivations are concealed in words, Burke presents his five (pentadic) key terms—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. To describe any symbolic act fully, Burke notes:

You must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose. (Burke [1945] 1969, p. xv)

Though the pentad seems to function like the journalist's "Five Ws" (who, what, when, where, why), Burke ([1945] 1969) argues that the correlation of two terms, labeled as the "ratio", is located at the very center of motivational assumptions (p. 11). Defining the intrinsic linkage between two terms, the pentadic ratio indicates our understanding of one term in the scope or circumference of the controlling one (Rountree 1998). Burke first developed ten ratios from the five terms but subsequently claimed the meaningfulness of the reversible ratios, thus generating a total of 20 motivational vocabularies. They are scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent-purpose, agent-agency, agency-purpose, and the flipped ones.

Pentadic criticism, as Foss (2018) argues, is a three-step method. The first step is to identify the five key terms in the artifact from the author's perspective. Specifically, pentadic terms should be used to identify elements internal to the text. The following step is to determine which of the five elements dominates the pentadic or is the governing term featured by the author. To describe the relations between the dominant term and the comparatively slighted ones, Burke uses what he calls *ratio*. Discovering the dominant term provides insight into whatever dimension of the situation the author privileges as the driving force behind everything else. Once dominant terms are identified in the pentad, the rhetor's motive can be illustrated based on the terms. However, Burke suggests a philosophical approach to gain a more in-depth idea about a rhetor's motive: to identify the philosophical system corresponding to the dominant term. Each of the five terms, according to Burke ([1945] 1969), corresponds to a specific philosophical terminology: scene—materialism; agent—idealism; agency—pragmatism; purpose—mysticism; and act—realism (p. 128). For instance, if the *scene* is featured, the philosophical system of materialism will be located, which regards that all facts and reality should be used to explain the motion in the text.

Though Burke's chief contribution has been in developing rhetorical criticism, and his pentadic analysis has been widely utilized and proven to be effective in the field of rhetoric, Burke (1968, p. 210) believes that what applies to rhetoric should also apply to literature: "Effective literature could be nothing else but rhetoric." Consequently, following Burke's pentadic criticism, we examine Van Gulik's Judge Dee series with a particular focus on the chapters (of relevant novels) in which the identities of criminal clergy and the chain of evidence are disclosed, aiming to demystify Van Gulik's description of the relationship between religion and crime. Though seven cases were identified in the text (see Table 1), we will concentrate our analysis on five since the other two—*The Chinese Lake Murder* and

The Chinese Maze Murder—are only narrated briefly. We classify our discussions based on Van Gulik's descriptions of case-solving acts (interrogation, admission, and confession).

4.1. Interrogation: That God and the Devotee Do Good

The first section is arranged around how Judge Dee [agent], on how his belief in governmental discipline, the sanctity of religion, and Confucian doctrines [agency], settles the case (act)—to protect the holiness of Buddhism and the Buddhist mission [purpose]. Yet unlike typical detective fiction's emphasis on the investigator [agent], Van Gulik's Judge Dee series focuses on governmental and Confucian beliefs; they serve as guidelines for Dee's actions. *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Chinese Bell Murders*, in particular, demonstrate this primary preference for the (social) agency.

The Chinese Gold Murders dramatizes the identification of the crimes by the Buddhist monks who are confederates with local magnates in smuggling gold from Korea to the Imperial Capital. Judge Dee discloses the misdeed in the White Cloud Temple, where a magnificent consecration ceremony for the original sandalwood statue of Maitreya is held. This chapter consists of two "Acts" (the word "act" is used in a purely technical sense to indicate a major division of a plot) to demonstrate Judge Dee's disclosure of the smuggled gold case, with each highlighting the sanctity of religion.

Act I features a *scene-act* ratio in which the *scene* of the consecration ceremony of a Maitreya statue circumscribes everyone's corresponding *acts*. In fact, to underline the scene's solemnity and holiness, Van Gulik, apart from descriptions of the ceremonial decoration, even noted twice that the incense was as "heavy" or seemed like "thick clouds." Being a fit "container" for the act, the nature of the scene determines the acts and agents (Burke [1945] 1969, p. 3). Therefore, regardless of Judge Dee's choice of very few accomplices (three assistants and two constables), the location of his palanquin (at the entrance), or the monks' behaviors—chanting songs, playing musical instruments, and singing in the chorus—they all echo the solemn and sacred nature of the scene. The respect that agent Dee has for Buddhist Doctrine, along with governmental disciplines, are transformed into the guidelines [agency], following which the inspection and the interrogation [act] are performed in Act II.

Interrupting the abbot Huiben, Judge Dee rises suddenly from his seat and notes that since the Buddhist Church's lofty teachings have such a beneficial influence on the manners and morals of the public, the imperial government decides to grant their high protection to the church [scene]. Identifying himself as the magistrate of Penglai, Judge Dee further declares his endowed mission as representing the imperial government [agency] to protect the White Cloud Temple [act]. In this way, Judge Dee's statements not only open Act II but also, by underlining governmental disciplines, legitimize the subsequent examination and interrogation. As Burke ([1945] 1969, p. 283) indicates, the featuring of agency points to a philosophy of pragmatism, a principle of mediation standing midway between act and scene. Against the imperial government's determination to maintain Buddhism's holiness, as well as the temple and the statue of Lord Maitreya, the governmental disciplines and the government's promise work to lead *agent* Dee's and other constables' on-site actions. Though Act II demonstrates the success of investigation activities undertaken by Judge Dee and his constables, we still can see how the *agency* drives these *acts*, as it is expressed in Judge Dee's statements as they are performed.

For example, before ordering his assistant to verify the authenticity of the Maitreya statue, Judge Dee reminds the public of his official identity and the corresponding responsibility. He states, "Since I, the magistrate, am fully responsible for all that happens in this officially recognized place of worship, it is my duty to verify . . . whether this status is indeed what it is claimed to be . . ." (Van Gulik 2004, p. 178). Though no specific rules or disciplines are identified in Dee's words, naming the Buddhist temple as "officially recognized" and clarifying his official duty as being accountable for maintaining the peace and order in the temple, Judge Dee justifies his actions by referring to imperial government doctrine. This doctrine, "function[ing]" to protect the holy Buddhism and its temples is

not only “good for” the religion but also the adherents (Burke [1945] 1969, p. 277). Similarly, to appease the unknown and agitated public, Judge Dee shouts, “Impious crooks have insulted the Lord Maitreya,” as Chiao Tai (one of Judge Dee’s assistants) hands him a small piece off the shoulder of the statue his sword chipped off. Judge Dee continues,

This statue is not made of cedarwood, but of solid gold! Greedy criminals wanted thus to convey their smuggled gold to the capital for their illegal gain! I, the magistrate, accuse of this atrocious sacrilege the donor of the statue ... (Van Gulik 2004, p. 180)

Before we move on, Judge Dee’s description of the crime is an interesting point to note. In fact, based on Van Gulik’s construction of the judge figure, we can conclude that Judge Dee does not believe in Buddhism but admires Confucianism. Yet while we might think that smuggling was much more severe than blasphemy for people appreciating Confucian doctrines, Judge Dee, in this case, orders the criminals to stand trial on the charge of sacrilegious crime without mentioning the gold smuggling. As a government official fulfilling the imperial government’s promise to give the church a high degree of protection, Judge Dee does not employ governmental rules or Confucian disciplines to settle the case. Instead, the logic, the reason [agency] behind Judge Dee’s case-solving, is the belief in maintaining the sanctity of religion. That said, the judge’s reverence and acknowledgment of the mystic virtue of religion only reveal Van Gulik’s motivation to promote what he perceives to be religion’s sanctity. In this way, *agent* Dee in the text becomes Van Gulik’s *agency* through which religion’s holiness can be revealed and celebrated.

The Chinese Bell Murders tells of the malicious crime of Buddhist monks seducing barren wives with the deceptive promise that they may get pregnant by spending the night at the Temple of Boundless Mercy. Although the section on Judge Dee’s case-solving in this story is shorter than the previous one, an *agency-act* ratio is still readily identified. The story begins with the testimony of Apricot, who acts undercover and accuses three monks of forcing her to have sex while she pretends to pray to Lady Kwan Yin to conceive her husband’s child [scene]. Then, as Judge Dee announces his plan to investigate the crime thoroughly by digging out other criminals, an old monk, identified as the former and real abbot of the Temple comes on stage and continues to expose the crimes committed by the fake abbot and his henchmen. After hearing Apricot’s and the old monk’s accusations, the public is outraged, muttering curses against the monks. To appease the public, the judge orders the crowd to stand back and shouts out how the criminals destroyed the roots of the peaceful society by committing crimes against the state and violating the doctrines upheld by Master Confucius. Consequently, the imperial laws to maintain the peace and order of the society and the Confucian doctrines serve as the *agency* for the *agent* Dee to interrogate the criminals further in the tribunal [act].

The common point of these two stories is underlining the *agency* while downplaying the *agent*. We learned from Burke that the agent only acts under the scene. In other words, the agent does not possess the act; the scene does. Yet instead of emphasizing the *scene*, Van Gulik featured *agency* as the traditional term propelling Judge Dee’s acts. Corresponding to the philosophical terminology of pragmatism, agency is interpreted as “the means necessary to the attainment of happiness” (Burke [1945] 1969, p. 275). Along with state laws and Confucian doctrines, faith in a sacred religion, in Van Gulik’s work, can indeed be argued as a third way to happiness.

4.2. Admission: Religion Recedes from Crime

In the last two cases, the details of the crimes, including the criminals’ history and motive, are deduced by Judge Dee and his *co-agents*. The victim’s testimony and the judge’s forceful interrogation with strong evidence have played a significant role, leading the villains to admit their crimes. However, in cases like *The Haunted Monastery* and *The Phantom of The Temple*, the clergy acknowledge crimes through dialogues with Judge Dee. Consequently, *acts* are performed not only by *agent* Dee but also by *anti-agent* criminal clergy.

Having said that, two pentadic systems, centered respectively on agent and anti-agent, are emergent and overlap throughout these two episodes.

At the end of *The Haunted Monastery*, after sorting out his thoughts over the three women killed in the temple, Judge Dee finds a secret room where the suspect, Sun Ming, the Taoist sage, stands bent over the bamboo couch. Then, he begins his dialogue with Sun in this confined and narrow space [scene]. While amazed at Judge Dee's cleverness in locating the secret room all by himself, Sun, in his conversation with the judge, tells of his misdeeds case by case [act]. First, an apparent *purpose-act* ratio can be identified in Sun's admission. Driven by the purpose of demonstrating his criminal intelligence, Sun confesses to the crimes he committed. When confronted with Judge Dee's identification of Sun's negligence in the process of committing the crime, Sun rebukes the judge for being completely wrong since the Gallery of Horrors would be closed for some time every year to defend his choice of the gallery as the place confining Miss Kang. "And it was a very original idea, don't you think?" Sun says rhetorically (Van Gulik 1997b, p. 175).

Similarly, after explaining his murder of Mrs. Pao, Sun says to Judge Dee with a quick smile that he enjoyed the battle of wits with such a clever opponent as the judge. The point worth noting is that the *act* in which Sun narrates his crimes becomes the *agency* in Judge Dee's pentadic system for the judge to solve those cases. Yet, Sun's purpose in sharing his course of crime shifts from showing off his criminal intelligence to protecting himself from punishment after hearing the judge's statement about Sun's possible surrender in the tribunal.

To shield himself from legal liability [purpose], Sun attempts to persuade Judge Dee [act] of his innocence by using his reputation and social status [agency]. Noting his considerable influence in the capital, being the famous Taoist sage and the former Imperial Tutor, Sun says, "law and custom are only there for the common people; they don't apply to exalted persons like me. I belong to that small group of chosen people . . . far above ordinary human rules and limitations" (ibid., p. 182). There, an *agency-purpose* ratio is featured. In this way, Taoist religion and even his status in the religious system become instruments for Sun to accumulate cultural and social capital, allowing him to override the law. In addition, the *agency* in *anti-agent* Sun's pentadic system defines the *scene* in *agent* Dee's motivational terminology, from which the judge identifies the penalty for this famous sage. Given the inability to provide evidence, Judge Dee would only get into trouble by initiating a case against such a prestigious sage. In this case, Judge Dee lures Sun to the high gate between the east wing and the storeroom building and closes the door after Sun has gone inside. There, the judge leaves the decision of whether Sun can remain alive or not to a Higher Tribunal (Heaven [act]).

In fact, we do not mean to discuss the legality of Judge Dee's decision. In a *scene* like this, the chosen people are above the conventional definitions of good and evil. As Burke (Burke [1945] 1969) would say, Dee's acts have nothing to do with Judge Dee as a person but are sanctioned by the scene. Even though such an arrangement might expose the legal system's loopholes, it communicates Van Gulik's understanding of religion as a precondition for morality. Namely, even if the law cannot convict Sun, Heaven (religion) can.

The Phantom of The Temple narrates the crimes in the Purple Clouds Temple, that the criminals attempt to take the stolen gold from the government by killing other diggers. Having identified the principal villains and found the treasure, Judge Dee decides to tie up some loose ends by consulting the head of the beggars, a Buddhist monk whose identity is concealed. There, we locate a *purpose-act* ratio in agent Dee's pentadic system. Playing out in the dialogue with the Monk, *purpose-act* on Dee's end transforms into *agency-purpose* on the *anti-agent* Monk's end. In the conversation with Judge Dee, the Monk reveals the crimes committed by Li, Yang, and Tala (Buddhist sorceress), and him, with descriptions that at all times indicate his undying love for Tala. In the Monk's narration, satisfying their respective desires (purpose) becomes the driving force behind their crimes (act); for instance, Tala's betrayal of her God and assisting Li and Yang in smuggling the gold is to fulfill her lust for earthly love. The Monk's blackmailing of Li for the gold so that he can

take Tala away from Li and then wean Tala away from her God is motivated by his desire to have Tala. But then, how can a devout religious believer have such worldly lusts? Tala cannot, and neither can the Monk. Wedded and abandoned by her God, Tala becomes an empty shell.

Whereas for Burke ([1945] 1969), the purpose is especially susceptible to dissolution (p. 290). “In mysticism,” Burke states, “purpose is made absolute [and] always complicates matters by requiring us to lose purpose at the very moment when we find it” (p. 289). After becoming the high priestess and knowing all the secrets, Tala might think she finds her purpose when meeting Li and falling in love with him. But when Tala meets Yang, she throws Li away as if she has found a new purpose: to flee with Yang across the border and begin a new life there. The betrayer Tala has been made to chase her purpose until death when she is finally reunited with her God. The same may be said for the Monk. After he betrays God for Tala and is dumped by Tala, the Monk pursues his purpose of getting Tala back, even her empty shell, by committing crimes. As Tala dies, the Monk finds no reason to continue his life. Indeed, via Judge Dee, Van Gulik expresses his awareness of the power of religion. Dee says, “I told Yang that the horse that breaks loose from the team will roam over the plain, free and untrammelled” (Van Gulik 2010, p. 202). But the day will come when it grows lonely and tired. Then it finds itself all alone and lost—the track effaced by the wind, and the chariot vanishes beyond the horizon. If faith is the team, then how are Tala and the Monk not the two lone horses off the team? When desire and obsession fade, faith is no longer there either.

Meanwhile, the autocratic power of this religion is also represented in these two devotees. However, this religion does not represent orthodox Buddhism in the eye of Judge Dee. Western scholars have designated it Tantric Buddhism, which originated in northern India and arrived in China during the early Tang Dynasty (from 618 to 907 AD), as Van Gulik notes in his Postscript (Van Dover 2015, p. 138). While believing that “[t]he original teaching of the Buddha contains many a lofty thought”, the judge, an orthodox Confucianist, does not give any support to “Buddhist idolatry in any form” (ibid., p. 22), showing his respect for the orthodox religions and contempt for the non-mainstream religions. As for the advertisement of Tantric Buddhism that “the intercourse of a man and a woman is a replica of the mating of Heaven and Earth and a means of reaching salvation”, the judge distains that it is just a trick played by the fake devotees to perform their “abominable excesses, committed under the cloak of religion” (ibid., p. 21).

4.3. Confession: The Criminal Clergy Shows Her Morality

This section is titled “confession” because a clergy member reveals the unsolved cases, including her crime, even before Judge Dee interrogates her. This novel, *Poets and Murder*, is narrated by three narrowly connected cases: a maid beaten to death, the murder of a dancer, Small Phoenix, and Soong I-wen, a student. Yoo-lan, the Taoist nun (also the most famous poetess), is accused of killing her servant girl. But because of her reputation and popularity, the literary circle reaches the consensus that she has been falsely accused. The scene depicts the local gentry, the judge, and Yoo-lan gathering in the magistrate’s residence and discussing the cases when Yoo-lan suddenly starts to confess [act]. Thereby, an apparent scene–act ratio can be identified. In particular, her two inconsistent versions of confession in the narrative are driven by two different scenes.

Yoo-lan’s first confession bursts out when Judge Dee and other gentries discuss Small Phoenix’s and Soong’s cases. Yet, to Yoo-lan, their discussion is not casual but a deliberate trap to bring out the murderer. While Yoo-lan attempts to stop their discussion by posing a rhetorical question, she simultaneously defines the scene. Yoo-lan asks, “Must you go on with all that horrible talk? ... With this sly stalking of your prey, closing in, in ever-narrowing circles ...” (Van Gulik 1996, p. 162). Metaphorically, Yoo-lan illustrates her perception of the tensions beneath a casual conversation. Forced by such a scene, Yoo-lan reveals [act] the three crimes and claims they were all committed by herself alone. However, Yoo-lan’s confession is interrupted by Shao Fan-wen’s sudden movements.

After shouting, “I don’t want to owe anything to a common whore” (ibid., p. 166), Shao rises from the banquet and jumps over the balustrade into the gorge. Shao’s suicide breaks the first *scene* and constructs another for Yoo-lan: the permanent loss of the only man she ever loved. Though Yoo-lan continues to confess [act], her narration goes the other way around. This time, she reveals the truth and her purpose of lying previously to the judge. Being in love with Shao for all her life, Yoo-lan attempts to protect Shao by admitting to all the crimes that Shao has committed, including the murderer of Small Phoenix and Soong I-wen. In this *scene*, Yoo-lan’s narration [act] becomes aimless: like an inner monologue, a memorial to a lost love, ridicule of her years-long stupid, abject devotion. Perhaps it is Shao’s suicide that makes Yoo-lan finally realize how blind her devotion is—does she really know him? Would she not know that Shao’s gigantic, superhuman pride would not allow him to live with the knowledge of someone who pitied him? The act contained in the scene has the same properties as the scene (Burke [1945] 1969). Yoo-lan’s purposeless narration, in this way, echoes the hopelessness in the scene.

Though Yoo-lan is a Taoist nun, her religious identity has almost faded in Van Gulik’s narration of her confession. Regardless of Yoo-lan’s crime of whipping her maid to death in the White Heron Monastery, the narrative brings other facets of her life to the fore: a scapegoat for love, a victim in love, and a confessor for love with pride. All these facets push her crime out of the scene and help explain, if not excuse, it in the readers’ eyes. In the end, Yoo-lan is not a nun but a pitiful woman obsessed with Shao who has allowed herself to be entangled in such an abnormal relationship for her entire life. In addition, Yoo-lan is the only criminal clergy in Van Gulik’s stories who repents her misdeed. Though there is no evidence to attribute her change to religious belief, Yoo-lan does display the vision, echo, and morality as a priest with wisdom, commitment, and responsibility.

5. Conclusions

Following Burke’s pentadic criticism, this study, through analyzing Van Gulik’s Judge Dee mysteries with a focus on Van Gulik’s depictions of criminal acts perpetrated by members of religious orders and organizations, reveals Van Gulik’s intention to protect the integrity of religion by attributing misdeeds to the clergy only through the adoption of the Janus-faced clergy crime writing style. A ratio, in Burke’s terms, not only functions to discover the cause–effect relationship between the pairing elements but also serves to disclose how the author deflects attention from other elements to the featured one in the pentad, thus helping us to see the “restructuring of the audience’s view of reality” (Ling 1970, p. 82). In our analysis, we set the pentadic system upon the plot where Judge Dee cracks the criminal case, from which we identify and illustrate some dominant paired elements, *agency–act*, and *agency–purpose* in the highest frequency. The featured *agency* and its corresponding philosophical system, pragmatism, help reveal Van Gulik’s treatments of the crime–religion relations in his detective fiction. As our previous analysis demonstrated, compared to typical Chinese or Western courtroom fiction, Van Gulik’s depictions of religion and crime reveal a more nuanced relationship between the two.

Unlike the traditional Chinese courtroom fiction in which evil clergy represents the evil of religion, Van Gulik’s evil clergy fiction overemphasizes religion as the *agency*, the autocratic power system, only through which can justice be delivered, morality established, and happiness attained. Van Gulik’s focus on religion as *agency* in both *The Chinese Gold Murders* and *The Chinese Bell Murders*, while downplaying the role of *agent* Dee’s function in the case-solving procedures, communicated his vision of religion (Torah) as a code of conduct for the world. While in *The Haunted Monastery* and *The Phantom of The Temple*, the autocratic power of religion has been further highlighted: namely, the almighty religion can deliver the light of justice to every corner, even where the law fails to reach. Although religion as the *agency* to directly help restore justice is limited in *Poets and Murder*, Yoo-lan’s religious identity shined through in her confession: a forthright, honest criminal nun who was courageous enough to assume responsibility for her crime.

Burke ([1945] 1969) claims that the pragmatic evaluates doctrines based on their “consequence,” or what they are “good for” (p. 277). This philosophical viewpoint adequately explains Van Gulik’s depiction of the Buddhist Cycle of Karma by setting up religion as the code of behavior. From Van Gulik’s narrations, we can see that he manages to differentiate between the good and evil disciples, between the *acts* of the disciples and the *beliefs* of religions, and between the non-mainstream religion and the orthodox religion, presenting a heterogeneous religious crime and creating an effect that erases the causal relationship between crime and religion. Furthermore, in these five cases, religion is considered equivalent to morality and the last shield that safeguards the order of human society.

As the absolute protagonist in the mysteries, Judge Dee has expressed ambiguous ideas about religion in many places. He acknowledges the profound philosophy of Buddhism for its “lofty teachings” (Van Gulik 2010, p. 22) and Taoism for its “abstruse knowledge” of “life and death” (Van Gulik 1997b, p. 189). However, as a Confucius scholar, Judge Dee is satisfied with the teachings of the Sage Confucius and shows his neglect of religion: “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” (Van Gulik 1977, p. 44). This contradictory complex toward religion comes from the creator Van Gulik’s arrangement as, on the one hand, he follows the tradition of Chinese courtroom fiction, in which Buddhism and Taoism are prejudiced, but on the other hand, Van Gulik himself thinks that the two religions “are much more elevated in thought than Confucianism.” And the fact that the Confucius judge sometimes turns to religion for guidance or is illuminated by religion is in line with one of the religion’s functions in western detective fiction, where the detectives are connected with the omnipotent God when they are no longer self-sufficient. This combination of the traditions in China and the West well explains the Janus-faced clergy crime fiction: the misdeeds of clergy and the sanctity of religion.

Van Gulik reminds readers that he manages to construct a Judge Dee deviating from the figure who “may not show any human weaknesses and never allow himself to become emotionally involved in the cases he deals with” (Van Gulik 2022, p. 243) a detective figure different the classic ones in the time-honored Chinese tradition. Hence, his Judge Dee reaches “a compromise between the ‘superman’ dictated by Chinese tradition, and a more human type of person” (ibid.). However, our study shows that Van Gulik’s construction of Judge Dee not only transcends absoluteness (absolute upright or miscreant) and simplicity (simplifying the character’s social relations and his/her humanity). But also, when elaborating the smaller forms of Chinese sources (texts) into larger and more comprehensive narrations (stories), Van Gulik has always taken into account the multidimensional and complicated human nature, an intrinsic concern when designing his characters. As a result, walking into the contextualized scene to check agent, act, agency, and purpose is important and intriguing.

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Notes

- ¹ Judge Dee is a semi-fictional character based on the Chinese historical figure Di Renjie [狄仁傑] in the Tang dynasty, who is a county magistrate and statesman. Di Renjie is highly respected by the Chinese for his fairness in cases. For more information on the real Judge Dee, see (McMullen 1993).
- ² These volumes are neither written nor published in chronological order. Nor is the outline of Judge Dee’s life in a corresponding order with the order of publication. For more information on the chronology of the publication or the detective’s life, see (Van Dover 2015; Wei 2022; Van Gulik 2004).

- 3 The secularization or vulgarization of Buddhism (fo jiao shi su hua) [佛教世俗化] means a loss of sanctity in the transformation “from an elite religion to a popular or vulgar practice” (Wu 2019, p. 564).
- 4 The story was composed from 1948 to 1951 when Van Gulik worked for the Netherlands Embassy in Tokyo (Zhang 2021, p. 235). That might be the reason it was given consideration by a Japanese publisher.
- 5 Yasushi (2012) finds that it is rare to expose the crimes of nuns and Taoists in late Ming fiction, which concentrates on the evil conduct of clergies.

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