ARTS AND LITERATURE

The Chinese Nail Murders: Forensic Medicine in Imperial China

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Robert van Gulik was a respected Dutch sinologist and author who first translated a collection of traditional Chinese detective stories into English and then created additional fictional stories based on the same characters and setting in the Tang dynasty. One of these stories, The Chinese Nail Murders, draws on van Gulik’s professional interest in law and his knowledge of early Chinese works on forensic medicine. This novel develops a common theme in Chinese detective fiction, murder by a nail wound to the head. The difficulty in detection of this mode of violence posed a particular problem for the examining magistrate because postmortem examination was mostly limited to external observations. This essay compares the development of Chinese and Western forensic medicine in the context of the nail murder motif.

The employment of medical knowledge in the service of legal justice has old roots in European jurisprudence as well as in the Chinese legal tradition. Accounts of forensic medical practice are common in the popular literature of both the East and West, a favorite genre being the detective story. In the tales of crime and detection from China, a particular motif recurs frequently and the stories with this motif serve as an interesting window on the practice and development of medical jurisprudence in Imperial China. This essay will consider this motif, its ancient roots, and its relation to old Chinese texts on forensic medicine.

AN ACCOUNT

One day, in China of about 1700, Magistrate Shih Shih-lun was riding into a provincial town under his jurisdiction and was confronted by an old woman carrying a sign. The characters on the sign were a petition to the magistrate for help because the old lady claimed to have been unjustly convicted of some crime. As it was his responsibility to ensure just and fair application of the law, Shih summoned the old woman and carefully questioned her. It seems that her son and granddaughter had died recently and she had accused her daughter-in-law of doing away with them.

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Now in Imperial China there was a legal principle called *fan tso* which means "reverse punishment" [1]. This arrangement required that if one person falsely accused another of a crime, the false accuser was given the penalty that would have befallen the accused, if they had been found guilty of the crime. By this principle, then, the old lady was subject to the punishment for murder, namely the death penalty. As the story unfolds, Shih hears the common tale of a young, unhappy wife, married to an honest, hard-working but dull husband. One day they quarreled and she left to return to her parents. After a few days, she returned and in better spirits.

Soon after this the sudden death of her husband and daughter occurred. At the official investigation of the deaths, a verdict of death by natural causes was rendered because there was no sign of violent death, even though the distraught mother gave testimony of the domestic disharmony and accused the wife of the double murder.

Upon hearing this testimony, Magistrate Shih ordered the body exhumed for reexamination. This step was not undertaken lightly, because he, too, was under the penalty of *fan tso* and could be taken to task for disturbing the repose of the deceased. The examination was conducted with much thoroughness, yet it revealed no signs of violence. The young widow still maintained her innocence, and indeed reviled Magistrate Shih for this grave insult to her dead husband.

The next night, Magistrate Shih had two dreams: one of a man with a bloody head and a young girl with a bloody dress in a graveyard scene. The second dream was more confusing: he was at a big fair and heard a street poet chanting; the lines of the poem seemed to contain the implication of a murder done by someone with the name of Hua Yu Chun (Jade Flower Spring). The next day Shih was more than ever convinced that the husband and daughter had been murdered, so he again ordered the husband’s body exhumed and had the coroner re-examine it. Now the coroner was quite worried about this, because he, too, could be criticized for not being sufficiently diligent if this re-examination also found nothing. As the coroner was leaving his home to go to the inquest, his wife, conscious of his anxiety, suggested that he be especially mindful of examining the head for evidence of puncture wounds.

At the second examination, the coroner carefully examined the body again, and upon detailed inspection of the scalp, after shaving the hair, found the tiny head of a long iron nail that had been driven into the skull and was clearly the cause of the victim’s death. When this was revealed to the assembled crowd, the daughter-in-law quickly confessed that she had taken up with a new lover and did the dastardly deeds to free herself to marry him.

Now Magistrate Shih conferred with the coroner and asked him about his wife, her age, how long they had been married and other particulars. It turned out that she had been married before, but her first husband had died. When she was summoned to the court and questioned, not only was there a discrepancy in her account of her life, but it was found that her name was Jade Flower Spring. In the course of seemingly ordinary conversation, Magistrate Shih asked her where she had learned the technique of nail murder; upon hearing this she became agitated and asked to leave. With that, Shih sprung his trap and confronted her with the murder of her first husband. Needless to say, she readily confessed. Both women were executed, because, in the words of one recount of this tale: “it would be a caution to other wives, and show them that even though they hid for years, murder will out” [2].

The gruesome technique of nail murder in this rather convoluted tale is a
favorite of Chinese popular literature of homicide and detection. It's earliest appearance in this genre seems to be in crime novels of the 18th century, and the version given here is from a novel Kung Shi An [3] about the cases solved by the Ch’ing dynasty scholar-official Shih Shih-lun who lived from 1659 to 1722. At least since then, both in popular fiction and in public story-telling tradition, this nail murder motif recurs frequently. Two modern accounts are available in Western literature, one a recent English translation of one of the 18th century stories, and the other a modern fictionalized detective story, both by the Dutch scholar and sinologist, Robert Hans van Gulik.

ROBERT VAN GULIK

Van Gulik [4], who died in 1967 at the age of 57, was trained as a lawyer, did graduate work in Asian languages and literature, and received a D. Litt. in 1935 at Utrecht. He entered the Dutch diplomatic service as a career officer and was posted to Japan, India, Washington, Beirut, Damascus, Kuala Lumpur, and ended his career as the Ambassador to Japan from the Netherlands. He had a true scholar’s interest in the ancient cultures about him, and looked carefully into the “little” things. For example, he wrote two monographs on the Chinese lute, an ancient instrument he reputedly played well. He translated a famous Chinese text by Mi Fu on ink stones, the artistically carved stone inkwells that are used to grind the solid inkblock with water to make the ink for Chinese calligraphy. He wrote the still-definitive treatise on the connoisseurship of Chinese scroll paintings, complete with a sheaf of paper samples he collected stuffed into a pocket in the back endpaper of each copy.

Like a true Chinese gentleman who collects rare books and curios, van Gulik had his lively side, too. In 1940 he ran across one of the 18th century novels mentioned above. He became engrossed in the Chinese genre of detective stories and courtroom stories, and published a partial translation of this novel in 1949 as Dee Goong An [5]. This work is a collection of three episodes in the work of a T’ang dynasty magistrate Ti Jen-chieh, a frequent hero of Chinese detective stories [6]. Van Gulik’s fascination with Chinese detective work and jurisprudence led him to translate a 13th century casebook: T’ang yin pi shih (Parallel Cases from Under the Pear Tree) [7]. Detective stories, East and West, frequently involve the steamier aspects of life, and perhaps this fact led van Gulik to develop a parallel interest in the lives of courtesans and concubines.

He published a private edition of erotic color prints struck from the original Ming dynasty wood blocks along with a scholarly essay on the history of Chinese sex life from 206 B.C. to 1644 A.D. [8]. This edition was followed up by publication in 1961 of a long monograph on Sexual Life in Ancient China [9]. This interesting treatise is a mixture of English and Latin, the latter language used to reserve the sexually explicit passages for true scholars only.

His translations of the Judge Dee stories proved so popular that his friends persuaded him to try his hand at creating his own story in the Chinese manner. What followed were 12 full-length Judge Dee novels, a collection of short stories, and a syndicated comic strip for Dutch and Scandinavian daily newspapers. His second novel, The Chinese Nail Murders [10], is based on the case described above.

THE CHINESE DETECTIVE STORY

The Chinese Nail Murders [10] is fairly typical of the genre as summarized by Lach [6]: it is based on a hero, in this case a real personage, Ti Jen-hieh, or as van
Gulik renders his name and title, "Judge" Dee⁶, who demonstrates marvelous feats of detection, upright moral conduct and uncanny insight. In Imperial China, the local magistrate acted as detective, prosecutor, judge and public avenger. In contrast to Western detective stories, Chinese stories usually involve multiple crimes and cases simultaneously. The magistrate has a busy district and does not have the luxury of dealing with only one case at a time. The crimes occur early in the story and often are found eventually to be interrelated. The cases usually involve crimes against individuals, especially murder and rape, rather than offenses against society as a whole. The judge is the direct representative of the state from the Emperor on down, and he must investigate the crime, capture the criminal, decide guilt and dole out punishment. His role and its limitations are strictly codified in the law, and he has little possibility of exercising individual discretion. The Chinese magistrate, like Sherlock Holmes, has superhuman powers of observation and insight, but in contrast to his Western counterpart, the magistrate frequently receives hints or clues through supernatural means, through dreams or ghosts, as in the example cited above.

A theme of retributive justice runs through the Chinese detective story. The magistrate is charged with publically redressing the wrongs committed by the guilty. The proceedings are held in open court; careful records are kept. The magistrate is supposed to recognize guilt or innocence by his superior skill, but still his case must be proved in open court so that the accused confesses. The guiding principle in the judicial proceedings is the assumption that the accused is guilty until he can prove his innocence. This principle was not part of the law, but seems pervasive in the casebook accounts [11]. Confession is required in order to render a verdict of guilty. Needless to say, confessions (of course, from one who is known to be guilty) are frequently prompted by "judicial beatings." All death sentences, however, are supposed to be reviewed by the Emperor himself.

When one inquires into the origins of the Chinese detective story, the earliest concrete example currently known is from a 1975 excavation in Hubei province dating from about 220 B.C. [12]. A series of bamboo strip books includes accounts of detection and crime, as well as popular stories about the magistrate as detective. Another early text gives clues to the origins of the nail murder motif, and several of these early works on forensic medicine serve to illustrate the development of the union of medical knowledge and jurisprudence in China.

CHINESE ADMINISTRATION AND THE IMPERIAL INQUEST

At this point, it would be well to consider the administrative bureaucratic system of Imperial China: the magistrate, the emperor’s representative at the local level, got his job by virtue of competitive civil service examination. Now this seems like a sensible idea, except that the exams, and hence the educational preparation of government officials, had nothing to do with the practical requirements of the job. The examination covered classical poetry, philosophy, painting and literature, not agriculture, economics, geography, engineering, and administration. Medicine in Imperial China was in a peculiar position. Although at times there were government-sponsored schools for physicians and

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⁶ The traditional Wade-Giles Romanization is "Ti." Pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese renders the Wade-Giles "t" as "d," hence the phonetic spelling of "Dee."
examinations in medicine, the physician was generally regarded as a member of the artisan class and not in the same class as government officials, i.e., scholars. There were even debates as to whether it was possible to be a Jen-I or Confucian Physician because of the conflicting philosophical bases of the two ideals [13]. On the other hand, every scholar-gentleman was expected to know sufficient medicine to care for his family, especially his parents. This situation put the magistrate in the position of having to get his medical knowledge from the main source of learning in classical China: books.

The local magistrate and his staff, which often consisted of only two others, a registrar and a sheriff, were the front line in the administration of the Chinese Empire. The problem of governing a huge empire with a small group of officials who were generalists, devoid of any specific training for their jobs, was formidable. The local officials depended on a group of unpaid clerks and village functionaries to carry out the day-to-day activities of government. These low-level administrators collected what might euphemistically might be called “end-user fees” to earn a living [14]. Such a stressed bureaucratic system meant that officials concentrated only on the most serious offenses. These were perceived as offenses that undermined the stability of the government, such as smuggling, tax evasion, banditry, and so on. Only the most grievous personal offenses such as violent robbery, murder and rape usually came to the attention of the magistrate for his action. The rest were resolved if at all possible at a lower level by the clerks and village elders.

In 995 A.D., during the Sung dynasty, a key decree established the inquest system that became the paradigm in China down to recent times [15]. It established the conditions under which an inquest was required, who was to conduct the inquest, and the procedures to be followed. These procedures sound surprisingly modern: for example timing, was considered very important; specific time limits were set, within which the inquest must be held. On arrival at the scene of the death, the official should first question the person who discovered the body, then the relatives, neighbors, witnesses and village elders, in their turn. It was particularly important if the victim was still alive to question him and quickly determine the time period known as the “death limit.” This was an interesting concept that set the length of time within which death would be attributed to the current injuries. If death occurred after the limit, the accused assailant would not be held liable for murder, only for assault. In Sung China, the injured victim was placed in the care of the accused on the theory that the accused person had the most to gain from the victim’s recovery. After the interrogations, the official was instructed to proceed to the forensic exam.

The actual examination was carried out by a person called “wu tso,” who was sort of a coroner’s assistant. In the case of examination of a woman, a midwife or “old lady” was employed. The judicial official, however, was instructed to stand close by (the stench notwithstanding) and observe the examination closely. The examination was to be conducted in the open, in the presence of the family of the victim and the accused, as well as the village elders. The results of the findings were called out, and a clerk noted them on official forms, which included anatomical drawings on which the injuries were noted in red. It is interesting that the forms were printed in triplicate and sequentially numbered by the verses from a classic Chinese character book called the Thousand Character Classic. Presumably, fraud and falsification of inquest records were a problem. The report was then read aloud to the assembly, and if the parties all agreed to its accuracy, it was signed by the witnesses, and copies were forwarded to the next
highest administrative level. This inquest report was used in the subsequent investigation and trial and later in any judicial review of the case. If the death was due to foul play or if a prisoner died, the law specified that a re-inquest was required by the next higher level of authority, usually by an official at the Prefect level (a Prefect comprised a group of counties, but was not as large as a province).

The open, confrontational nature of the inquest must have had a “Perry Mason” quality about it. The psychological pressure on the accused, who was forced to watch the examination of the victim in the presence of the deceased’s family, as well as in the presence of the magistrate, who came with all the trappings of Imperial power, must have been severe. The case records suggest that confessions often were forthcoming at the inquest.

Let us turn from the legal background of the inquest system to the texts themselves and see what kinds of cases were of interest to Magistrate Sung, and learn something of the medico-legal sophistication of Imperial China.

CHINESE TEXTS ON MEDICAL JURISPRUDENCE

The earliest surviving reference to forensic medicine in Chinese literature has been traced back to 239 B.C. [16]. This was the date of a famous Chinese classic, Master Lu’s Spring and Autumn Annals: A compendium of natural philosophy, although some scholars believe some passages in this work date as far back as the 7th century BCE. In the Spring and Autumn Annals one finds the following entry for the first month of autumn:

In this month orders are given to the proper officers to revise the laws and ordinances, to put the prisons in good repair, to provide handcuffs and fetters, to repress and stop villainy, to maintain a watch against crime and wickedness and to do their best to capture criminals.

Orders are also given to the judicial officials in charge to investigate superficial bruises, to examine open or bleeding wounds, to look for damaged bones and sinews, as well as those that are broken:

In judging cases, it is essential for officials to be correct and fair; those who have committed the crime of killing others must receive the most severe punishment.” [16]

Lu and Needham [16] suggest that the seasonal nature of this “law and order campaign” coincided with the long standing Chinese practice of executing criminals only in the fall, to allow their souls to be in harmony with the falling leaves and falling snow. From about the same time as the Spring and Autumn Annals, we have the Ch’in dynasty bamboo books mentioned above. They are entitled Models for Sealing and Investigating and have a number of passages of medical interest in them. Several clearly relate to problems of medical jurisprudence and are quoted by Lu and Needham [12]: one case describes death by robbery with violence, one death by hanging, another describes a miscarriage, and a fourth involves a case of leprosy. These accounts all involve detailed examination of the body in question, its surroundings, careful questioning of witnesses, and accurate recording of the findings.

The most famous book on forensic medicine in China, however, is the case book written in 1247 A.D. This work is entirely devoted to the topic of forensic medicine and served as a manual for magistrates and coroners in China down to the modern period. Written by a magistrate named Sung Szu, it is entitled Hsi Yuan Chi Lu, or The Collected Writings on the Washing Away of Wrongs [14] (Figure 1). In this work, Sung collects examples of cases from many previous works and weaves them into a book designed to help his fellow magistrates.
The book has five chapters. The first is a list of laws relating to the conduct of the official conducting the inquest to help the magistrate avoid legal and ethical pitfalls. The second chapter is on the technique of the examination. For example, there are suggestions on how to make subtle injuries become visible, such as warming the body or viewing it in filtered light obtained by use of an oiled paper parasol. The problem of examination of decomposed bodies is also covered. The instructions on writing up the inquest report seem as pertinent today as when they were written over seven centuries ago:

In writing up inquests, do not put down, "The skin was broken. Then blood flows out", since, in general, when the skin is broken, blood flows out. The record ought to read, "The skin was slightly injured. There was a flow of blood".

The third chapter deals with the examination of bones as well as the location of vital spots for lethal injuries. Chapters 4 and 5 are in some ways the most interesting because they describe specific cases. For example, there are sections dealing with death by poison, death of prisoners, death by tiger bites, death from sexual excess, and death from acupuncture and moxibustion. This last problem is noteworthy, because it is one of the few instances where the magistrate is advised to call in a physician for consultation. Since this type of death involved medical malpractice, even in Imperial China a medical peer review system seems to have been in use. The specific charge in this case was one that appeared in Chinese law at least as early as the T'ang Code, which dates from 624 A.D., but ying wei, "doing what ought not to be done." This was a catch-all charge that allowed magistrates considerable leeway. The punishments, however, were relatively light.

Another important book on jurisprudence, mentioned above and dating from the 1200's, is entitled T'ang yin pi shih, or Parallel Cases from Under the Pear Tree. This English rendition is by van Gulik who translated a major part of this book. He notes that a more prosaic translation would be "parallel cases solved by eminent judges", but "t'ang yin" means "in the shadow of the pear tree" and is an old literary allusion to a just and benevolent official who rendered his judgements while sitting under an old wild pear tree. This book is a collection of cases assembled and presented in pairs: hence the name "Parallel Cases." The pairs of cases are coupled not by the facts of the cases, but because the same reasoning or method of detection was applied to each case. Thus, it is a study in method. This book, also was intended as a manual for magistrates. Like the Washing Away of Wrongs, the T'ang yin pi shih has had a long history, too. It was published in numerous editions in China and was reprinted extensively in Korea and Japan.

Parallel Cases differs from the Washing Away of Wrongs in that the case histories describe the situations and circumstances, motivations and deceptions of the crime. The Washing Away of Wrongs is more of a technical treatise applying medical observations to a given situation.

Two short cases from the T'ang yin pi shih serve to show the parallelism and the nature of the detection involved:

The following are the cases listed as 26: "Fu Yen has silk flogged; Li Hui has salt beaten out":

A. In the (Former) Sung Dynasty (420-479 A.D.), when Fu (Yen, styled) Chi-Kuei was magistrate in Shan-yin, there were two (old women), one of whom sold sugar and the other needles. They had a quarrel over the ownership of a ball of silk, and brought the matter before Fu Yen. He ordered to hang the silk against a pillar and to flog it; then some iron filings dropped from it. He thereupon fined the woman who sold sugar.
B. When Li Hui of the Later Wei Dynasty (386-534 A.D.) served as Prefect of Yang-chou, a salt carrier and a wood carrier quarreled about a lamb-skin, each claiming it as the very one he used to wear on his back. Li Hui ordered one of his officers: “Question this skin under torture, then you will know its owner.” All the officers were dumbfounded. Li Hui had the lamb-skin placed on a mat, and had it beaten with a stick; then grains of salt came out of it. He showed them to the contestants, and the wood carrier confessed. [22]

THE NAIL MOTIF

Both of these texts from the Sung dynasty, that is, the 13th century, contain references to the nail murder motif. In Parallel Cases, the pair of cases listed as number 16 are entitled “Cheng recognizes evil; Yen suspects crying.” Both cases illustrate the astute judgement of the magistrate in detecting the insincere crying of a recent widow, i.e., crying out of fear rather than of grief. We read as follows:

When Yen was Prefect of Yang-chou he once made a tour of inspection of the territory under his jurisdiction. Suddenly he heard someone crying in fear rather than in sadness. He halted his chariot and interrogated that person. She answered: “My husband had an accident with fire and burned to death.” Yen Tsun suspected her and had a constable watch the dead body. He noticed flies congregate on the top of the dead man’s head. He parted the hair and looked: he found the head of an iron nail that had been driven into the skull. Then it transpired that the woman had together with her paramour murdered her husband, and their guilt was established.” [23]

This seems to be the first reference to the nail motif. If it is assumed that the attribution is correct, it can be dated by the reference to the official, Yen Tsun and the place, Yang-chou. Other historical documents indicate that Yen was Prefect in Yang-chou during the Eastern Han (25-220 A.D.) [2].

In The Washing Away of Wrongs, in the instructions for the examination of the body at inquests, there are specific requirements that:

The back of the head, the crown of the head, and the hair should be very carefully examined, lest a hot spike have been inserted into the body there. In such cases there will be no flow of blood and the wound may remain hidden. [25]

From this brief survey of ancient and medieval Chinese sources, it is clear that the application of medical knowledge to legal problems was well-developed by at least 1200 A.D.. In addition, the nail motif can be traced back as regular theme in these writings, almost to the earliest times.

FORENSIC MEDICINE IN EUROPE

It is of interest to ask what was going on in the West and how forensic medicine developed there. It is not intended to review here the history of forensic medicine in Europe in detail, except to note a

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An early Western (or Middle-Eastern) reference to the nail murder motif in the Bible (Judges 4.21) was pointed out to me by Dr. Sherwin Nuland. In this case there was no attempt to use the technique to conceal a murder as a natural death. Jael killed Sisera, the leader of the enemy army, while he slept by driving a tent pin into his temple, and it pierced through into the ground. The only other literary reference to the nail-murder technique in the Western canon known to the author comes from Shakespeare: The Tempest (III, ii): Caliban speaking to Stephano: “Yea, yea my lord! I’ll yield him [Prospero] thee asleep where thou mayst knock a nail into his head.”

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the ontology of illness in Chinese Traditional Medicine, it is important to note that the strong link between observable anatomical structures, deranged function, and illness was not a hallmark of Chinese medical thought as it was becoming in medieval Europe and the Arab world.
few similarities and differences with its counterpart in China. It is well to keep in mind a major difference between the two traditions: For all their detailed procedures, inquests in China involved careful external inspections rather than internal examination. There were few autopsies in China and dissection to discover the basis of disease was very uncommon [26]. Physicians in China were concerned with living people and their cure. They had little interest in the dead. Thus, it was the magistrate, with his legal responsibilities, who developed the field of forensic medicine in China.

But what of forensic medicine in the West? When did medical knowledge join in the dispensing of justice? As far back as the Hippocratic corpus we find matters relating to issues with legal overtones, for example the determination of the average length of gestation and the relative fatality of wounds in different parts of the body [27]. History also gives us isolated cases suggesting medico-legal examinations such as the report by a physician named Antistius, who examined the body of Julius Caesar and found 23 stab wounds, only one of which was judged to be mortal; that was a wound that penetrated the chest between the first and second ribs [28]. Galen described a case of a Greek lady who escaped punishment as an adulteress on the testimony of a physician. She had given birth to a child that did not in any way resemble the legitimate father, and this was ascribed by the physician to the fact that the child resembled a portrait hanging on the wall of the lady’s bedroom, upon which she gazed during her confinement [28].

However, it was in the Code of Justinian in the Sixth century that we first find clear statements of the role of medical knowledge in legal proceedings. Not only did the Justinian Code regulate aspects of medical and surgical practice, but it was interpreted to require that medical experts assist the judiciary by impartial interpretations and opinions [29].

In Europe, interestingly, two somewhat different traditions emerged: one leading to the Anglo-American coroner system and the other giving rise to Continental system of professional medical examiners.

In Medieval England, which was a closer parallel to the Chinese system, a system of officials to deal with Crown pleas (custodes placitorum coronae, hence “coroner”) was established in 1194 A.D. [30]. These local county officials were appointed by the Crown and handled judicial matters at a local level. One of their important duties was to conduct inquests. The law specified that a jury of sufficient and able men be assembled as witnesses to view the body. This jury was instructed to address the following matters: was death by felony or mishap, of an act of God or man, famine, or pestilence? What was the domicile and identity of the victim? Had the victim succumbed at the hand of others, by drowning, strangulation, or other means? What was the nature, size and location of wounds? In the case of injured but living victims, the jury set a death limit just as in China. This system of Coroner and jury persists down to the present in England and America, although the professional medical examiner system is now replacing it.

On the Continent, formalized use of medical experts in judicial proceedings emerged in Bologna in the 13th century. Laws of 1252 and 1262 specified the use of medical testimony by the judicial authorities [31, 32]. This situation may reflect the fact that Bologna was a leading medical center of the time, and that the medical profession had unusual power and prestige in that city. Also, autopsies were beginning to be performed about that time, and this approach to examination of the deceased markedly increased the information that the medical expert could provide.
Despite this early use of medical experts in some of the Italian states, it was not until the 16th century that the Holy Ranan Empire enacted laws requiring medical testimony related to inquests. In 1602, the first comprehensive tract on medico-legal matters appeared when Fortunato Fedele, an Italian physician, published his *De Relationibus Medicorum* in Palermo. Only a little later, Paolo Zacchia published his book, *Questiones Medico-Legales* at Rome in about 1630. The establishment of systematic lecture courses and chairs in forensic medicine in Germany at the end of the 17th century, and in Paris, Strasbourg and Montpellier in the 18th century served to formally establish the position of this subject in the panoply of medical specialties [28].

When it comes to English medicine, the first English work on forensic medicine did not appear until the end of the 18th century when Samuel Farr published his *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence* in 1788. At the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, forensic medicine became established as a special branch of medicine in Britain with the establishment of the first chair of forensic medicine in 1807 in Edinburgh with formal lectures on medical jurisprudence and medical police (public health) [28].

This very brief review of some of the highlights of the development of forensic medicine in China and Europe provides the matrix into which the detective story is embedded. In China we find an ancient tradition of story-telling related to court cases. This tradition is supported by case books and manuals for the use of generalist officials charged with the daunting task of administration of a huge empire with inadequate resources. These casebooks describe classic problems in detection and frequently require application of medical knowledge in solving crimes against persons. The detective hero appears in Chinese popular literature almost from the earliest times and has survived quite well right down to the present.

Of course, the detective in Western literature is Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle, the physician, created Holmes of Victorian London, a detective modeled after one of Doyle’s astute medical teachers in Edinburgh. Robert van Gulik, the lawyer, gave us Judge Dee of T'ang China, a detective with sophisticated medical knowledge gleaned from classical Chinese texts. Both Holmes and Dee solve their cases with a combination of keen psychological insight, superior technical knowledge, clever uses of disguise, and uncanny powers of observation. If Holmes can be described as a scientist with legal interests, Dee must be thought of as the lawyer with scientific interests. Surely we must put this down as a case of convergent evolution.

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16. Lu, G.D. and Needham, J. Forensic medicine, p. 369. [see note 12].
17. McKnight, B.E. *Washing Away of Wrongs*, pp. 81-82. [see note 14].
18. Lu, G.D. and Needham, J. Forensic medicine, p. 379. [see note 12].
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21. van Gulik, R.H. *Parallel Cases*; p. 14. [see note 1].
22. van Gulik, R.H. *Parallel Cases*; pp. 112-113. [see note 1].
23. van Gulik, R.H. *Parallel Cases*; pp. 98-99. [see note 1].
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32. Lu, G.D. and Needham, J. Forensic medicine, p. 384. [see note 12].