KUNG-AN FICTION
A Historical and Critical Introduction

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Kung-an 公案 fiction includes a great variety of stories and novels of marked structural and contextual differences. This diversity itself permits the inclusion of certain debatable items, thus intensifying the ambiguity of the term. Lacking any clearly established guidelines for the practitioners to follow, kung-an fiction has inevitably fallen into a state of anarchic confusion. What this study proposes to do is not an attempt at definition, but rather an overall survey in the historico-critical framework of those works which either were considered as kung-an fiction in the period that produced them or fit in the criteria already accepted for the kung-an fiction of an earlier period. This method is intended to allow those works to speak for themselves instead of measuring them against a pre-conceived generic assumption.

Dictated by the availability of source materials, the present study takes the Northern Sung period, generally regarded as the formative period of vernacular fiction in China, as a point of departure. As it is usually neither plausible nor necessary to pinpoint the beginnings of a literary tradition, the Northern Sung period should not be arbitrarily regarded as the very origin of the kung-an tradition 1).

1) Literary scholars often have differing views concerning the origins of a literary form. Some are preoccupied with tracing comparable elements in remote sources; others are content to begin where the form has acquired enough features to be identified with the later mature model. The case of Western detective fiction helps illustrate the problem concerning kung-an fiction. Many competent historians of this type of Western literature consider that the beginning should be set at the pioneering efforts of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and/or his immediate predecessors, and that it is far-fetched to dig into the Bible, Herodotus, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Voltaire, or the Arabian Nights for vague early traces. See Julian Symons, Mortal Consequences: A History—From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel (New York, 1972), pp. 17 ff.; Keith Hollingsworth, The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, & Thackeray (Detroit, 1963), p. 55; Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story, enlarged ed. (New York, 1968), Ch. 1; S. S. Van Dine, ed., The Great Detective Stories:
Legends have treated the Northern Sung emperor Jen-tsung (r. 1023-1063) as a great patron of the art of storytelling. According to these legends, he had a story narrated before him every day and some of these stories found their way to the general public. Regardless of their philological value, such legends have at least helped to establish the fact that storytelling, presented in mature forms and freed from religious domination, had already acquired professional status to be a genuine popular entertainment no later than the early eleventh century. One phenomenon which demonstrates the high degree of professionalism in storytelling at that time was the establishment of various "schools" according to topics of narration. How these schools were actually divided has been the subject of passionate arguments for decades. However, some of the materials upon which the storytellers based their narration might have been revised by literary hands and might have survived in printed versions now known to us as hua-pen stories.

A Chronological Anthology (New York, 1927), pp. 11-13. To begin the Chinese case from the Northern Sung period follows the same principle. This argument is necessary as there have been signs of a tendency to trace the beginnings of Chinese detective fiction in some early writings, as indicated in Karashima Takeshi 辛島隆, "Chūgoku hanzai shōsetsu no ichimen" 中國犯罪小說的一面, appended to his translation Seisei kōgen 醒世恒言 (Tokyo, 1958), V, 7-9. To paraphrase Erik Routley, The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story: A Personal Monograph (London, 1972), p. 12, such early writings can only be regarded as detective fiction by those who have perceived the nature of Chinese detective and crime themes by reading the mature kung-an fiction produced by much later writers.

Such legends may be of fairly late origin. Lang Ying 郎瑛 (1487-after 1566), Ch'i-hsiu lei-kao 七修類稿 22 (Peking, 1959), I, 330, is perhaps one of the earliest records. In the preface to the Ku-chin hsiao-shuo 古今小說, Lü-t'ien kuan chu-jen 綠天簡主人, who was probably the editor Feng Meng-lung 鄭夢熊 (1574-after 1645) himself, also mentioned such legends with zeal.

This is, of course, not to ignore previous developments along this line, but we simply do not have any concrete evidence to establish indisputable connections—an illusion most Chinese fiction specialists would like us to believe. See my "The Beginnings of Professional Storytelling in China: A Critique of Current Theories and Evidence," in Études d'histoire et de littérature chinoises offertes au professeur Jaroslav Prášek (Paris, 1976), pp. 227-245.

The term hua-pen is used here as a modern designation for a group of stories with certain distinctive features. For explanation and supporting bibliography, see Note 2 in my article, "The Knight-Errant in Hua-pen Stories," T'oung Pao, 61 (1975), 267.