

The Detective Fiction of Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing

The emergence of modern popular literature marks one of the greatest changes in the literary world of early-twentieth-century China. During this period urban culture was also changing. The early decades witnessed the institution of the weekend among urban wage earners, the proliferation of affordable reading materials such as newspapers and magazines, and the unprecedented large-scale infusion of new ideas, which sometimes clashed and at other times merged with traditional ideas. Reading as a hobby spread to ever larger social circles, and market mechanisms soon arose to meet the increasing demands of readers.¹ Eventually, the purpose of reading received a new emphasis. While the written word maintained its traditionally sacrosanct position as a tool to inform and to teach, more and more people read for diversion. In response to this, some writers saw to it that their work provided the kind of entertainment sought by readers. A rapid succession of fads from the late teens to the early 1930s bears out this point: readers during this period were treated to such diverse subgenres as romantic love stories, detective stories, knight-errant tales, science fiction, and muckraking stories,² all of which claimed ancestry in earlier forms of writing and would receive further development in the years to come.³ Generally grouped under the umbrella term "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies Fiction," this body of popular literature has never sat well with critics,⁴ since to many, its emphasis

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¹ See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1981), chaps. 1 and 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³ See Lu Hsün 魯迅, "Ch'ing hsiao-shuo chih ssu ta p'ai chi ch'i mo-liu" 清小說之四大派及其末流, in *Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo shih-lieh* 中國小說史略 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh, 1973), pp. 301-9, for the connection between 20th-c. popular literature and literature of earlier periods. Lu Hsün's perceptive argument was stretched beyond recognition by later defenders of popular literature. That early 20th-c. popular literature continued to develop is self-evident, as one can easily find stories that bear similar techniques and import in newspapers and magazines even up to this day.

⁴ Objections to modern popular literature were raised almost as soon as it came into existence, and the prolonged debate which ensued between dissenters and devotees of popular literature continues today. Wei Shao-ch'ang 魏紹昌, *Yuan-yang hu-tieh p'ai yen-chiu tsu-liao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派研究資料 (Shanghai: Wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1984); and Jui Ho-shih 芮何師 et al., *Yuan-yang hu-tieh p'ai wen-hsüeh tsu-liao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派文學資料 (Fu-chou: Fu-chian jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1984), have collected writings that represent the opinions of the two camps.

on entertainment represents a degradation of the function of literature, which has traditionally been given an exalted position in Chinese culture.

Yet, to begrudge writers simply because their readers sought to while away a few idle hours is to ignore the cultural significance of popular literature, which, like other forms of cultural expression, operates in accordance with its own internal mechanisms quite independent of the way it is appreciated at any one historical moment. As Perry Link has noted, popular literature in early-twentieth-century China provided a special environment where readers were able to try out new ways of life at a safe distance.⁵ At the same time, perhaps unbeknownst to them, leisure reading performed the important social function of naturalizing foreign cultural elements new to China.

Contrary to the common view, most writers of popular literature were extremely serious about their work, sometimes excessively. Many prided themselves on continuing the traditions of social reform begun by late-Ch'ing writers. Muckraking novels popular in the twenties, for example, brought to public attention corrupt government practices and unhealthy social tendencies. Likewise, science fiction was supposed to help disseminate scientific knowledge and dispel superstition, while detective fiction was believed to encourage readers to be observant and law-abiding, and, in general, to develop their intellects.⁶ All this is not to deny the elements of frivolity. At least in some cases, however, not all was fun and games to the writers in question, who approached popular literature with attitudes different from those of their readers. The work of Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing 程小青, with which this paper is concerned, is best approached with a recognition that writers and readers often come to popular literature with different expectations.

Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing (1893-1976) was a native of Su-chou 蘇州.⁷ A

While popular literature seems to have been on the defensive most of the time, there has been a startling renewal of interest in recent years. See also Link, *Mandarin Ducks*, chap. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

⁶ Jeffrey Kinkley observes the same assumptions at work in crime literature of the post-Mao era. See his "Chinese Crime Fiction and Its Formulas at the Turn of the 1980s," Jeffrey Kinkley, ed., *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society 1978-1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1985), p. 89.

⁷ Little is known about Ch'eng's life. Current scholarship relies on two brief biographies for information: Yen Fu-sun 嚴芙蓀 et al., "Min-kuo chiu-p'ai hsiao-shuo ming-chia hsiao-shih" 民國舊派小說名家小史, in Wei, *Yen-chiu tzu-liao*, p. 550, and Cheng I-mei 鄭逸梅, "Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing," in Jui, *Wen-hsueh tzu-liao*, pp. 388-89. Wei Shao-ch'ang also includes in his *Wo-k'an yüan-yang hu-tieh p'ai* 我看鴛鴦蝴蝶派 (Hong Kong: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1990), part of a letter from Ch'eng, which gives invaluable information about his writing career.

teacher of Chinese at the Tung-wu Middle School 東吳中學 in his hometown, he is best known as a writer, translator, and critic of detective fiction. His most productive years spanned the 1920s to the 1940s, when he authored and translated more than one hundred volumes of detective fiction, including *Fan-shih t'an-an* 凡士探案, *Sheng-t'u t'an-an* 聖徒探案, *Ch'en Ch'a-li t'an-an* 陳查禮探案, *Shih-chieh ming-chüa chen-t'an hsiao-shuo chi* 世界名家偵探小說集, and many others. Considered by his contemporaries to be the best detective fiction writer of his day,⁸ he was held in high regard by fellow writers for his intricate and entrancing plots. His creative period, however, came to an end after 1949, although he published four more stories in the 1950s. According to Lu Wen-fu 陸文夫, who befriended Ch'eng in the sixties and seventies, he was reduced to very straitened circumstances in the last years of his life.⁹

Ch'eng's most famous creations are the detective hero Huo Sang 霍桑 and his assistant Pao Lang 包朗, whose adventures were told in a series of short stories and novellas. Originally published separately in magazines, the Huo Sang cases proved to be such a success among readers that they have repeatedly been printed in collections, including one that was published in 1985.¹⁰

The pairing of Huo Sang and Pao Lang is generally recognized as a direct borrowing from the West.¹¹ Specifically, they are modeled after Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Huo Sang was fondly named "the Chinese Sherlock Holmes" by readers, and Pao Lang is referred to in jest by Huo Sang as the "Dr. Watson of the East."¹² To a certain extent, both Huo Sang and Pao Lang possess attributes of their namesakes. Huo Sang, for example,

⁸ Contemporary writers and translators of detective fiction include Lin Shu 林紓, Ch'en Leng-hsueh 陳冷血, Pao T'ien-hsiao 包天笑, Hsü Cho-tai 徐卓呆, Yen Tu-ho 嚴獨鶴, Liu Pan-nung 劉半儂, Yü T'ien-fen 余天憤, Lu Tan-an 陸澹安, and Chang Pi-wu 張碧梧. Most were regarded as Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers, as was Ch'eng.

⁹ Lu Wen-fu, "Hsin-hsiang i-fan" 心香一瓣, *Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing wen-chi Huo Sang t'an-an hsuan* 程小青文集霍桑探案選 (Peking: Chung-kuo wen-lien, 1986), pp. 1-5.

¹⁰ In this paper, references to the Huo Sang cases are by way of the series *Huo Sang t'an-an hsü-ch'en ts'ung-k'an* 霍桑探案袖珍叢刊 (Peking: Shih-chieh shu-chü). In most cases, I cite first the title of the story, which is followed by the volume number of the series and then the page number. Some series volumes are not dated, while others are dated 1947. Almost all bear prefaces written by Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing in 1944, Chen T'ieh-i 陳蝶衣 in 1944, and Yao Su-feng 姚蘇鳳 in 1945. For a discussion of other extant editions of the Huo Sang cases, see Wei, *Wo k'an yüan-yang hu-tieh p'ai*, pp. 145-50.

¹¹ Cheng, "Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing," p. 388; Liu Yang-t'i 劉揚體, *Yüan-yang hu-tieh p'ai ts'o-p'in hsüan-p'ing* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派作品選評 (Ch'eng-tu: Ssu-ch'uan wen-i, 1987), p. 372; Fan Po-ch'un 范伯群, "Lun Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing ti Huo-sang t'an-an" 論程小青的霍桑探案, in Lu, *Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing wen-chi*, p. 3.

¹² Ch'eng, "Chiang-nan yen," vol. 19, p. 67.

displays character traits that are usually associated with the western detective, while at the same time representing the latest development to that point of the indigenous Chinese crime solver — a figure combining the selfless knight-errant and the impartial and compassionate judge. Such judge characters as Judge Pao 包公, Judge Ti 狄公, and Judge Shih 施公 were important in *kung-an* literature.¹³

In "Huo Sang ti t'ung-nien" 霍桑的童年, a "biography" of Huo Sang written in the voice of Pao Lang, the reader is introduced to Huo's family background, including, as is common to the traditional biographical form, a brief account of the life and aspirations of his father, Huo Yu-chih 霍有志. Educated in the traditional way, Huo Yu-chih is groomed for an official career, but his frankness and stubbornness make him a poor candidate for the capricious world of officialdom. He subsequently turns to business and then to farming. The young Huo Sang inherits his father's uprightness: as a rebel, he is constantly torn between a wish to obey his father and an insuppressible desire to follow his own will. He is attracted to the ancient Mo-ist philosophy of universal love and, with the impetuosity of youth, behaves in a manner reminiscent of the *yu-hsia* 遊俠 knight-errant figure.¹⁴ Although he has since renounced his extravagant ways, the will to redress wrong whenever he comes across it has never left him. A product of modern education, he nevertheless begrudges the new school curriculum for its emphasis on overall development, which to him represents a pressure to conform. As a result, he argues, specially gifted people are given little opportunity to develop their talents. Huo's own academic performance is uneven: except for practical subjects such as science, philosophy, psychology, and chemistry, for which he has a natural inclination, his work in other subjects is at best indifferent.

Details about Pao Lang, on the other hand, are not given in such a systematic fashion, and can only be reconstructed from the sparse information contained in various adventures of Huo Sang. The two have been good

friends for a long time, and share an apartment before Pao Lang's marriage. Unlike Huo Sang, who seems to be in possession of unspecified private means, Pao Lang is a journalist and writer by trade. Yet, he is so lured by the excitement of detective work that he sometimes puts his own professional duties aside in order to accompany Huo Sang in his many adventures. Together, they enjoy the status of social celebrities based on their success in combating crime, and their help is constantly sought by people from all walks of life.

For the most part, Huo Sang and Pao Lang operate in Shanghai, at the time the most westernized city on Chinese soil and symbol of the materialistic wealth and moral poverty of modern Chinese life. As the reader follows Huo's battle with crime, he is brought into contact with a cross-section of the Shanghai metropolis: from extravagant capitalists to exploited factory hands; from foreign-educated but hypocritical Ph.D.s to barely literate but honest servants; from vain and clumsy law enforcers to shrewd and ruthless criminals.

In many respects, the Huo Sang cases bear remarkable resemblances to detective fiction of the golden period in the West.¹⁵ First, like his western counterparts, Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing exploited the many dramatic possibilities provided by the interaction of the diverse set of characters. Typically, the crimes are rooted in greed, lust, and jealousy, which in turn reveal other heinous attributes of human nature.¹⁶ Second, to the extent that the reader can identify with the detective hero, the stories provide the intellectual delight of seeing the working of Huo's superior mind. In fact, as shown below, Huo attributes his success in combating crime primarily to his exercise of the "scientific mind," which he believes is linked to the importation of western learning.

These affinities to western detective fiction notwithstanding, the adventures of Huo Sang and Pao Lang are unique. Critics have pointed out that as reflections of the author's concern for a fairer and better China these stories

¹³ Noteworthy scholarship about *kung-an* fiction includes Y. W. Ma, "The Textual Tradition of Ming *Kung-an* Fiction: A Study of the *Lung-t'u kung-an*," *HJAS* 35 (1975), pp. 190-220; idem, "Kung-an Fiction: A Historical and Critical Introduction," *TP* 65.4-5 (1979), pp. 200-59; George Hayden, "The Courtroom Plays of the Yüan and Early Ming Periods," *HJAS* 34 (1974), pp. 192-220; and Ching-Hsi Peng, *Double Jeopardy: A Critique of Seven Yuan Courtroom Dramas* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, U. of Michigan, 1978).

¹⁴ The *yu-hsia* figure shares the stage with the judge in traditional *kung-an* fiction. See Ma, "Kung-an Fiction," esp. pp. 243-45, and W. L. Idema, "The Mystery of the Halved Judge Dee Novel: The Anonymous *Wu Tse-T'ien Su-ta Ch'ü-an* and Its Partial Translation by R. H. Van Gulik," *Tamkang Review* 7. 1 (April, 1977), pp. 155-69. Huo Sang in this sense can be said to represent the convergence of these two figures in modern Chinese detective fiction.

¹⁵ Ch'eng was often apologetic about the "backwardness" of Chinese detective fiction. See, for example, the following, delivered through Pao Lang's mouth in "Chiang-nan yen," pp. 37 and 68, respectively: "Detective skills in China are still in an elementary stage, and have not won the trust of society," and "Records of detective investigations in China that conform to rationality and are free from superstition and supernatural beings are as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns." Given such an attitude, it is only to be expected that Ch'eng aimed to model his work after detective fiction from the West. The golden period of western detective fiction refers to the two decades from 1920 to 1940, when the majority of the classics of western detective fiction were written.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Ch'eng's "Chiu-hou" 酒後, vol. 17; "Wang-mien chu" 王冕珠, vol. 30; and "Wu-kung mo-ying" 舞宮魔影, vol. 24.

provide more than simply a good read. Accordingly, Ch'eng is described as an author motivated by a "serious intent to seek an ideal."¹⁷ As an illustration of this intent, one can point to the fact that although the Huo Sang cases have their fair share of middle-class crimes and locked-room murders, many stories deal with large-scale social wrong-doing. "Pai sha-chin" 白紗巾 is one such story, where Huo Sang is drawn into a case involving illegal profiteering from grain sales that threatens to destabilize the price of rice. The results of such evil can be extremely serious, with ramifications affecting the livelihood of the whole country. Thematically, one is reminded of the famous *kung-an* play "Ch'en-chou mai-mi" 辰州賣米, where punishment of the culprit restores the balance of society.

Critics have identified two areas in which Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing surpasses other Chinese detective fiction writers. The first is his view of detective fiction as an educational tool, which receives detailed elaboration in his critical writings. According to Ch'eng, detective fiction has the effect of "expanding the rational faculty," "developing the mind for argumentation," "strengthening the power to observe, imagine, analyze, and think," and "enriching the reader's experience of society so as to allow him to distinguish truth from falsehood."¹⁸ In short, detective fiction is "a science textbook in disguise."¹⁹ For a similar reason, the world of Huo Sang constantly alludes to the latest theories of criminology and abnormal psychology, and Huo enjoys quoting from both well-known and obscure western scholars.²⁰ The reader, it is assumed, will be inspired enough by Huo Sang's success to pay attention to the sciences.

In this regard, the Huo Sang adventures exhibit a faith in science similar to that found in Western detective fiction. The story "Ch'uang" 窗, for example, can be read on one level as an illustration of a scientific law. In calculating the time of a murder, Huo Sang at first is misled by what the witnesses report to be the sound of a window closing at the scene of the crime. Later, bringing his scientific knowledge to bear on the case, he finally

deduces that the window is not closed, as he assumes at first, by the murderer at all. In fact, when the servant who discovers the corpse enters the room, he opens the door in such a hurry that he creates a partial vacuum in the room which causes the window to close on its own. It must be emphasized, however, that the "aura of science" in the Huo Sang stories is just as decorative as it is in detective stories in the West.²¹ In most cases, crimes are not solved by the exercise of scientific thinking, but through a combination of the detective's luck and the offender's carelessness.

Besides educational functions, Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing believed that detective fiction should serve moral and social goals as well. One cannot help but notice the many observations Huo Sang and Pao Lang make about Chinese tradition in general and Shanghai society in particular that prove, in the final analysis, to be irrelevant to the mystery narrative. For example, in "Ch'ing chün ju weng" 請君入甕, Pao Lang is seen ruminating on the political and social causes of the wide-scale collapse of traditional morality,²² and in "Yeh-pan hu-sheng" 夜半呼聲, the main plot of a murder mystery is framed by a diatribe against the superstitious quackery of a traditional Chinese doctor.²³ More consistently, Ch'eng speaks to the deplorable state of law and order in China at that time. In his dealings with the police, characterized by precarious cooperation and thinly veiled rivalry, Huo Sang often bemoans the failings of the Chinese justice system. "Laws," he counsels Pao Lang in "Shuang Hsün" 雙殉, "are nothing but rigid statutes. In their assessment of human behavior, all [the law-enforcers] are concerned with is whether the laws have been violated or not." To counteract the impersonality of law, he recommends the exercise of "conscience" and "compassion."²⁴ Similar critical reflections about other aspects of Chinese society can be found in other Huo Sang cases as well.

Ch'eng's unique contribution does not lie only in the promotion of modern science or articulation of moral and social concerns in the Huo Sang cases. Similar attempts can be observed in the works of other writers of his time. Rather, what sets Ch'eng apart is his consistent effort to incorporate two contradictory visions of life, which, in the beginning of the twentieth century, competed to lead China into the modern era.

Through two distinct steps discussed below, Ch'eng presented these two visions in all their strength and weakness with such impartiality that ulti-

¹⁷ Fan, "T'an-an," p. 1.
¹⁸ "Lun chen-t'an hsiao-shuo" 論偵探小說, vol. 30, p. 204. Ch'eng describes his view of detective fiction as "utilitarian" 功利.

¹⁹ Ch'eng, "Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo ti to fang-mien," 偵探小說的多方面 in Jui, *Wen-hsiieh tzu-hiao*, vol. 1, p. 70.

²⁰ Among the western names that Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing includes in his stories are those of the criminologists H. Cross and Lacassagne, and the psychologist G. H. Robinson. Whether or not these individuals are bona fide scholars is a moot point, since Ch'eng's purpose in alluding to them is to lend authority to the scientific claims of his stories. As a point of interest, Ch'eng is known to have enrolled in a study course on criminology offered by a U. S. correspondence school.

²¹ See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1980), p. 86, for a discussion of the use of science in western detective fiction.

²² Ch'eng, "Ch'ing chün ju weng", vol. 29, p. 139; see also "Ch'uang", vol. 18, p. 155.

²³ Ch'eng, "Yeh-pan hu-sheng", vol. 15, pp. 42 and 96.

²⁴ Ch'eng, "Shuang Hsün", vol. 23, p. 166.

mately the reader is left to decide between them for himself. On the most general level, many of the Huo Sang cases dwell on the theme of cultural dislocation on the threshold of the modern period. Crimes are seen, rightly or wrongly, as a result of the onslaught of western materialism and the demise of traditional morality. At the same time, Ch'eng is eager to show that the assimilation of western learning has also produced a new breed of heroes, who declare war on the unwholesome aspects of the past, including bureaucratic malpractice, corruption, social and legal injustice, and warlordism. It is obvious that the reader will not find simple answers to the clashes of East and West, and old and new, in the Huo Sang cases. The author can do no more than lay down choices for the reader.

The first step involves conscious literary maneuvers on Ch'eng's part to endow his characters with an ambiguous existence that crosses the boundary between reality and fabrication. That Huo Sang and Pao Lang are first and foremost characters in an imaginary world cannot be challenged. But it is obvious that Ch'eng also creates the impression that they have a real existence outside the imaginary realm of the stories, and the Huo Sang cases are faithful records of their words and actions. Hence, both Huo Sang and Pao Lang speak in two voices. In "Hsüeh-shou-yin" 血手印, for example, when Huo Sang explains with exceptional excitement the intricacy and superiority of the scientific method, Pao Lang observes mentally that Huo Sang is "lecturing" 訓誡, rather than conversing.²⁵ Indeed, whenever Huo Sang strays from the particulars of a case to pontificate on his method or his world, he seems to step out of his role as a character in a work of fiction to become a proselytizer of a new way of life and thinking. Although in this case Huo Sang speaks only to his partner, his other "lectures" seem to be designed to impart advice and guidance that spill over from the imaginary world of the story into the daily life of the reader. An obvious example can be found in "Ch'uang," where Ch'eng has Huo Sang lecture Pao Lang on the teachings of a psychologist by the name of G. H. Robinson to support his decision to investigate the least likely suspect.²⁶ To the extent that it does not serve to advance the plot in any appreciable way, such an appeal to authority is clumsy as a way of explaining Huo Sang's detective method. On the other hand, its heavy-handed didacticism seems to remove it from the immediate context of the story itself. Instead, one gets the impression that Huo Sang is at that moment not so much speaking to Pao Lang as taking the opportunity to impart the latest ideas of the said psychologist to the reader.

²⁵ Ch'eng, "Hsüeh-shou-yin," vol. 29, p. 7. ²⁶ Ch'eng, "Ch'uang," p. 154.

In a way, the fact that Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing allows his characters to speak within and without the literary text does not represent a drastic departure from the conventional practice of detective fiction writers in both the East and the West who make their stories seem to be records of real crimes, and their characters portraits of real people. In fact, one attempt towards this goal was so successful that even today the London post office has a box for mail addressed to Sherlock Holmes' fictitious apartment on Baker Street. In early-twentieth-century China, moreover, there existed a belief widely held among readers of popular literature that stories are only dramatizations of real events; as a result, readers often raised questions about the private lives of fictitious characters, very much as if they were persons in real life. In this way, the reader collaborates with the writer to blur the separation between imagination and reality.

Beyond bestowing a double voice upon his characters, Ch'eng also experimented with the art of narration to exploit to his further advantage the ambiguous relationship between fact and fiction. When readers wrote in to urge Ch'eng to publish more accounts of Huo's adventures, it was Pao Lang who answered in "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu" 舞后的歸宿 that he had first of all to obtain Huo's permission.²⁷ Other cases, Pao pleads on a different occasion, are still too sensitive to make public, such as "Yeh-pan hu-sheng," where he has to change the names of the parties involved to ensure confidentiality.²⁸ The overall effect is that the factuality of the Huo Sang cases is thereby reinforced.²⁹ The reader is in turn encouraged by these maneuvers to take as literal truth whatever is recorded. As a result, Huo Sang is in their eyes not just a literary creation modeled after some living detective, but in fact a living detective, and what he does and says, therefore, should have repercussions in real life.

In the same spirit, Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing also emphasizes repeatedly Pao's lack of first-hand knowledge of the cases in which he does not participate. The opening paragraph of "Hsin-hun-chieh" 新婚劫 is one of the many examples:

Now that we are living in different places and I occasionally have to go on trips to other places, I cannot be with Huo Sang all the time. The number of cases that Huo has handled all by himself is getting quite

²⁷ Ch'eng, "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu," vol. 7, p. 1. ²⁸ Ch'eng, "Yeh-pan hu-sheng," p. 1.

²⁹ Y. W. Ma notices that in *Liao-chai chih-i* 聊齋誌異 stories there is a similar attempt to provide a veneer of convincing factuality by the inclusion of painstakingly researched biographical information about the judge figures; Ma, "Kung-an Fiction," p. 239.

considerable. Stories such as "Mo-k'u shuang-hua" 魔窟雙花, "Yeh-pan hu-sheng," and "i-ko shen-shih" 一個紳士, which I published previously, are all results of his single-handed efforts. The following story was told to me after he successfully solved the case . . . Now I will adopt the *viewpoint of an observer*, and record below the story in the way the case developed.³⁰

It can be seen from Pao's own admission that there are other stories besides "Hsin-hun-chieh" that he reconstructs from Huo's own accounts. The "observer's viewpoint" 觀客的眼光 referred to in the last sentence turns out to be a category with no real substance, for this story is not narrated in a way significantly different from stories in which Pao Lang plays a part.³¹ Yet, by postulating such a spurious category, Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing furthers the impression that the reader is given only the truest accounts of the life of a living person. It is not up to the writer to divulge information about Huo Sang without his permission, much less to fabricate stories about him.

This point is reinforced in the tongue-in-cheek biography of Huo Sang that Ch'eng wrote in the voice of Pao Lang. The content of this biography has been discussed above, but I will comment briefly here on its rhetoric. Affecting a tone of feigned seriousness, Pao begins the biography by declaring that the task of writing has been forced upon him by the insistent demands of curious readers. In terms of narrative effect, however, the act of writing a biography (*li-chuan* 立傳), with all its didactic implications, confers upon the biographical subject immortality as well as the status of an exemplary figure. Huo's experiences, his strengths and failings, therefore, take on an added dimension of truthfulness, and, as a result, are meant to reflect the predicaments faced by readers in real life. Even the change in his father's career, from that of a trained scholar-official to a humble farmer, must have struck a responsive chord in the minds of a whole generation of scholars disenfranchised by the abolition of the civil service examination in 1906. (Pao Lang uses the word "*chiang-ko*" 降格—coming down a rung—to refer to the downward movement of his career.) For the younger generation of readers, Huo's ambiguous relationship with the past, here symbolized by his domineering but caring father, no doubt provided material for reflection as

³⁰ Ch'eng, "Hsin-hun-chieh," vol. 17, p. 1. Emphasis added.

³¹ This empty category is given further pseudo-theoretical support in "Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo ti to fang-mien," p. 71, where Ch'eng argues rather clumsily the distinction between "tzu-hsü-t'i" 自敘體 and "t'a-hsü-t'i" 他敘體, roughly corresponding to the "first person narrative" and "third person narrative," respectively. In any case, what may stand valid theoretically breaks down when applied to the Huo Sang cases, which employ the same narrative viewpoint throughout.

well. Finally, the idea of "practical disciplines," made up of subjects such as science and psychology, as opposed to other less "useful" subjects, must also have been a question very much in the minds of readers at a time when science, together with democracy, was upheld as a panacea for the ills of Chinese society.

One last example will suffice to illustrate Ch'eng's intention of perpetuating the myth that the imaginary characters in his stories are real human figures. In response to persistent queries from readers as to the origin of the name Huo Sang, Ch'eng provides an enigmatic answer that perhaps deserves special attention. He begins by explaining in "Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo ti to fang-mien" 偵探小說的多方面 that Huo Sang's name was "originally" Huo Sen 霍森 in the manuscript submitted to his editor. When the story appeared in the newspaper, however, it had become Huo Sang, due to what Ch'eng believed to be a clerical error. The mistake, however, stands uncorrected, because:

At the time, Huo Sen did not want to go through the trouble of posting a correction notice in the newspaper, so he allowed the mistake to stand, and came to acknowledge Huo Sang as his name.³²

At best, such an answer begs the question of origins, and, at worst, raises more doubts about the autonomy of fictitious characters. Does Huo Sang only exist on paper, or does he have an independent existence, one that would enable him to decide not to put up a correction notice? For that matter, what about Pao Lang, who not only appears in the cases, but also answers readers' mail? As Ch'eng notes in another part of the same essay, "The interplay between the seemingly real and the seemingly false 疑幻疑真, one must realize, has all along been the beauty of the structure of detective fiction."³³ In his characterization of Huo Sang and Pao Lang, Ch'eng exploits the "seemingly real" and "seemingly false" quality of detective fiction to the full.

While a reader may recognize the literary features discussed in the last section as no more than a game, it is a game that has far-reaching significance for an overall understanding of the world of Huo Sang and Pao Lang. Now that the "seemingly real" and "seemingly false" existence of the characters has been established, the relationship between Huo Sang and Pao Lang becomes more dynamic than what is suggested by the simple articulation of their views in the stories. Ch'eng's second step, therefore, focuses precisely

³² Ch'eng, "Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo ti to fang-mien," p. 76.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

on the interaction between Huo Sang and Pao Lang, which in the end produces a cultural meaning that is more variegated than a direct but static expression of social and moral concerns of the age.

Since Huo Sang and Pao Lang are modeled after Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, it behooves one to take a cursory look at the generic convention of western detective fiction in which detectives work in pairs. The assistant in a work of detective fiction has often been understood as fulfilling a narrative function that clears the way for the exercise of the reader's own voice. It is the consensus of critics that the appeal of detective fiction lies in the opportunity it gives the reader to match wits with the detective.³⁴ In accordance with rules that have come to be known as fair play,³⁵ the writer provides sufficient information that, if processed logically and with care, leads to the identification of the culprit. It becomes the reader's goal to beat the detective to the solution of the crime. Accordingly, an agent is provided within the text itself, through whom the reader can interact with the facts of the case. This task usually falls to the assistant, who typically stays at the side of the detective, where he has the opportunity to observe at close range the unfolding of the mystery. He is, in a manner of speaking, a clearinghouse for information, and, in the course of reordering events for the benefit of the reader, sums up and theorizes, much as a reader would. Often, the theories proposed by the assistant turn out to be either completely or partially wrong, yet he continues to act on the reader's behalf by indefatigably proposing yet another theory. The process is repeated a number of times up to the end of the story, when the solution to the mystery is usually revealed by the detective himself.

While the assistant appears to speak the mind of the reader in this game

³⁴ Proponents of alternative views include Norman Donaldson, who argues that it is possible to produce successful detective novels with give-away endings. See his "R. Austin Freeman: The Invention of Inversion," in Francis M. Nevins, Jr., ed., *The Mystery Writer's Art* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green U. Popular P., 1970), pp. 79-87. See also later views of what is known as "anti-detection" novels, whose philosophical position challenges the positivist thinking behind classical detective fiction: Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1981), especially the chapter on "Anti-detection," and Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois U.P., 1984).

³⁵ These rules are still held in high regard in many readers' clubs, although contemporary detective fiction writers have long disregarded them in their writings. For a sampling, see Howard Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1946), pp. 189-99, and Marie F. Rodell, *Mystery Fiction: Theory and Technique* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1952), pp. 90-102. See also Roger Caillosi, "The Detective Novel As Game," Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, eds., *The Poetics of Murder* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 1-12, where he argues that close attention to these rules has reduced these stories to no more than a mathematical game, and prevented them from gaining a psychological depth characteristic of novels.

of matching wits, it is also a convention of the genre in the West to make him slower and more obtuse than the reader.³⁶ Hence, explanations that the assistant presents are more often than not so simplistic that the reader can join with the detective in rejecting them. As a result, experienced readers soon learn that the assistant's analysis of a case is to be heeded only with due allowance for errors. It is through this half-credible agent that the writer plants most of the misleading clues in a detective story. Instead of obtaining reliable help from someone close to the detective, the reader now has to look at the crime through a pair of colored spectacles, namely, the error-prone mind of the assistant. The assistant is a mixed blessing in aiding the reader towards the solution to the crime.

Such a description of the assistant's function in a detective story can be applied to Pao Lang's role in the Huo Sang stories. He observes Huo Sang in action, and, in his reports, often provides important or distracting clues, as the case may be, and his own reading of them to the reader. There is a chapter in the middle of most stories where Pao Lang is seen either tossing in bed or chain-smoking in his study, totally absorbed in a vain attempt to figure out, first and foremost, what is in Huo Sang's mind. In desperation, he even entreats the reader to help him.³⁷ Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing explains the narrative interest thus derived:

In order to set up this maze of possible solutions to the mystery, it is naturally indispensable to lay down several lines of thought, which may seem to be both feasible and unfeasible at the same time. These lines are raised as possibilities in the story by secondary characters such as Pao Lang, the police officer, and the chief detective. Of course, these lines that Pao proposes can stand up to the test of logic, but they are also unworkable in one way or another. His view represents that of an intellectually developed, honest, and curious reader.³⁸

Another view of the pairing of the detective and his assistant is derived from the assertion of some critics and writers that the detective hero is the alter-ego of the writer. When asked whether Lew Archer was modeled after any real person, Ross MacDonald answered cryptically, "I wasn't Archer, exactly, but Archer was me," maintaining that "a close paternal and fraternal relationship between writer and detective is a marked peculiarity of the form

³⁶ See Ernst Kaemmel, "Literature under the Table: The Detective Novel and Its Social Mission," in *Poetics of Murder*, p. 60: "The reader himself must be cleverer than the assistant; the assistant is 'the great simpleton.'"

³⁷ Ch'eng, "Ch'uang," p. 164.

³⁸ Ch'eng, "Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo ti to fang-mien", p. 72.

[of detective fiction].” Finding statements of similar import in other authors, MacDonald demonstrates convincingly that in the novels of Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, and others, “the detective hero has represented his creator and carried his values into action in society.”³⁹

One observes a similar projection of Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing in Huo Sang. Not only do the detective and the author share similar background and beliefs, but Ch'eng has been portrayed in the several biographical sketches available to us as a kind of amateur detective. We learn from “Chiang-nan yen” 江南燕 and “Huo Sang ti t'ung-nien,” for example, that, like Ch'eng, Huo is a native of Su-chou. Moreover, both the author and the detective are admirers of Mo-tzu, whose philosophy of universal love is repeatedly referred to in the story.⁴⁰ An anecdote is also told by Cheng I-mei about Ch'eng in the days when he taught at Tung-wu Middle School. His bicycle was stolen one day, and an enthusiastic reader of the Huo Sang cases published a story in the newspaper, jokingly commenting on the irony of “Huo Sang's being a victim of theft.” Ch'eng immediately took up the challenge, and, as if Huo Sang's reputation were at stake, recovered the stolen bicycle by exercising the ingenuity characteristic of a detective.⁴¹

Ross MacDonald's basic point, however, is that, apart from postponing the solution and sending the reader off track, the assistant can represent a facet of the writer's personality different from that represented by the detective. In the case of Poe, for example, Dupin and his friend stand for the two conflicting sides of Poe's psyche: his strong desire for freedom of imagination, on the one hand, and yearning for the security of order, on the other. This dialogue between the “poet” and the “mathematician” allows the author to “handle dangerous emotional material at two or more removes from himself.”⁴²

Too little is known about Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing for us to argue that Huo Sang and Pao Lang are projections of different aspects of his psyche.⁴³ Yet, it is obvious that Huo Sang and Pao Lang have a symbiotic relationship. At times, Ch'eng even suggests that they are so close that they are as good as

³⁹ Ross MacDonald, “The Writer as Detective Hero,” in Nevins, ed., *The Mystery Writer's Art*, p. 295.

⁴⁰ Ch'eng, “Chiang-nan yen,” p. 1; “Huo Sang ti t'ung-nien,” pp. 1, 163.

⁴¹ Cheng, “Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing,” pp. 388-89.

⁴² MacDonald, “Writer as Detective Hero,” p. 297.

⁴³ One incident in Ch'eng's early life that might have required psychological compensation of the kind described by Ross MacDonald is his failure in love, which was widely publicized by a story written by Chou Shou-chuan 周瘦麟. See Cheng, “Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing,” p. 388. Yet, Ch'eng was reticent about this episode of his life: the love interest in the Huo Sang stories is minimal.

married. As bachelors, they share an apartment, and, although Pao moves out after he is married, he still stays with Huo Sang when the opportunity arises. In “Hei ti-lao” 黑地牢, when Pao is faced with what he believes to be certain death, the only two people he thinks of are his wife and Huo Sang. The strongest hint of the close relationship between Huo Sang and Pao Lang appears in “Hsin-hun-chieh,” where their pictures are printed side by side on the social page of the newspaper, next to a pair of newlyweds. I do not mean to suggest that there is a homosexual attraction between Huo and Pao, but merely that the close relationship between the two is constantly emphasized in the stories.

In fact, Pao Lang's and Huo Sang's loyalty for each other seems so excessive at times that the reader may discern between them the bond of *i ch'i* 義氣 that characterizes the relationship between traditional heroes such as those in *Shui hu chuan* 水滸傳. Pao, in particular, tends to take insults directed at Huo Sang in a personal way, sometimes to the point of completely identifying himself with his friend. In “Pai-i-kuai” 白衣怪 Pao is seen defending Huo's reputation against the insults of an arrogant police officer:

As I heard this, I could no longer contain myself. The way he bragged about himself was a sure sign that he took no heed of Huo Sang at all. Since Huo Sang was not around, he might as well have been ridiculing me.⁴⁴

Conversely, if Huo can count on his friend to look out for his interests, Pao's reliance on Huo is even more pronounced. In “Ch'uang,” when Pao is arrested in connection with a murder, Huo Sang becomes his only hope of getting acquitted. He is beside himself with delight when Huo Sang comes to his aid:

With this greeting from Huo Sang, I felt like someone met by a stream of light after walking alone in the dark. All of a sudden, my spirits were uplifted.⁴⁵

Such is the spiritual strength Huo provides. Pao's exaggerated confidence in his friend's ability amounts to what Ross MacDonald calls the “blind admiration” of one projection of the author for another. The logical conclusion is inescapable: to represent the writer's personality in the composite and complementary pair of detective and assistant is “an element of narcissistic fantasy.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ch'eng, “Pai-i-kuai,” vol. 8, p. 121.

⁴⁵ Ch'eng, “Ch'uang,” p. 123.

⁴⁶ MacDonald, “Writer as Detective Hero,” p. 297.

The relationship between Huo and Pao is not marked by mutual admiration alone, however. In fact, one is struck more by the occasional but significant moments of discord between them. Herein perhaps lies the major difference between Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing and other Chinese detective fiction writers. Huo Sang at times can be extremely supercilious, while, for his part, Pao Lang more than once shows his impatience with his friend's high-handed manner of refusing to share his insights about cases until the last moment.⁴⁷ Their disagreements are for the most part gentlemanly, but the chasm between them goes much deeper. It results not so much from temperamental differences as from two conflicting ways of life, and, arguably, from two competing visions of how China is to reinvigorate itself.

These two ways of life can be described as those that are governed respectively by the "scientific mind" 科學的頭腦 and the "literary mind" 文學的頭腦, to use the terms in "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu."⁴⁸ Huo is a self-proclaimed scientist and seizes every opportunity to flaunt his scientific acumen,⁴⁹ while Pao Lang is originally a writer by profession, and joins his friend for excitement as well as the satisfaction of serving one's fellow human beings that criminal investigation affords. Their belief in the uniqueness and worth of their vocation leads them time and again into arguments, providing plenty of opportunities for the reader to reflect on the relative strength of their positions.

While the literary mind is only briefly referred to in the Huo Sang cases, the operation of the "scientific mind" is given an explicit explanation in "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu." By way of enlightening his friend, Huo describes it thus:

I have often told you that when a scientist conducts his research, he should never hold on to any preconceived ideas. He has to make use of an unclouded mind to observe closely, look for evidence rigorously, and

⁴⁷ E.g., Ch'eng, "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu," pp. 129-30. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ As a generic convention, detective fiction tends to exaggerate the wonders of criminological and forensic science. The most common example would be the determination of the circumstances surrounding a victim's death to an exactitude not possible in science. As for the detective's logic, Jeffrey Kinkley discovers that often detective fiction writers commit the "fallacy of the undistributed middle term," whereby "the conclusion reached by the gifted investigator, and offered by him as inevitable, is seen by the reader to be merely one of a number of possible alternatives." See his "Chinese Crime Fiction," pp. 106, 107. Huo's scientific knowledge would of course appear to be elementary and even laughable to the modern reader, and his reasoning is far from free of logical lapses. See also Phil and Karen McArdle, *Fatal Fascination: Where Fact Meets Fiction in Police Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), for a discussion of the exaggeration by detective fiction writers of the efficacy of science.

collect faithfully all relevant information, before coming to a conclusion.⁵⁰

By contrast, Pao describes his way of crime detection in two sentences: "Listening to the sound, and looking into the reason. Scrutinizing the appearance, and examining the countenance" 聆音察理鑒貌辨色.⁵¹ Such methods of detection depend on speculation about the culprit's motives and close observation of any outward displays of guilty conscience by the suspect. This is at best unreliable, according to Huo, because anyone under investigation by an unpredictable police force tends to act suspiciously.

Huo continues to point out on another occasion that Pao's flaw lies in his being unwittingly influenced by literature. In particular, he is "poisoned by the reading of western [detective] fiction" 中歐美小說之毒,⁵² so much so that all he can do is apply rigidly what he has read from books, without realizing that what they portray bears little resemblance to situations in real life.

It would therefore appear that Huo has won the argument. His scientific knowledge and logical reasoning prove almost invariably successful, while the reader has all along been aware that Pao's analyses of cases should not be unduly trusted. There are, however, indications that Pao's position cannot be so easily dismissed, for, in Ch'eng's view, a lack of empathy for literature often leads to the distortion of one's past.

This is best illustrated in a bewildering discussion of literature by Huo Sang and Pao Lang in "Hei ti-lao," where, at the sight of a bee buzzing among the flowers, Pao Lang is led to recite a poem written by Lo Yin 羅隱 of the Five Dynasties. Lo Yin's original poem on bees concludes with these two lines:

Fluttering among the hundred flowers, making honey,
For whom is this labor? For whom is this sweetness?
探得百花成蜜後
爲誰辛苦爲誰甜

A discussion of the poem ensues. Impatient with what he believes to be the willy-nilly tone of the poem, Huo would have its ending changed, thus hoping to inject a more positive note:

⁵⁰ Ch'eng, "Wu-hou ti kwei-shu," p. 86.

⁵¹ Ch'eng, "Chiang-nan yen," p. 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

For the people they labor,
 For the people they offer sweetness.
 爲人辛苦爲人甜

Huo's intent is obvious. By changing the concluding question into an answer in the affirmative, he has expressed in no uncertain terms that which has driven him to declare war on crime in the first place. Huo's admirable social-mindedness, of course, is not lost on Pao, who, while sharing his friend's selflessness, cannot see the aesthetic merit of such a revision. When asked for his opinion on this bold revision, he is at a loss for an answer:

How should I answer him? No, I can't put it into words. His reason for making this revision is in keeping with contemporary thinking, and of course stands up to the test of logic. However, for him to use such a standard to judge the poetry of the ancients I somehow feel is not very appropriate.⁵⁵

Perhaps, what is not appropriate is that, in this case, "contemporary thinking" and "logic" have blinded Huo Sang to the beauty of the suggestive conclusion of the poem. Using such a standard to judge the poem, Huo Sang has allowed himself to be cut off from the past, a loss which, as Pao points out, is difficult to put into words.

For his part, Huo Sang does not seem to share this sense of loss; neither, for that matter, would some of the readers of the Huo Sang cases. As one of the banners under which the New Culture Movement marched, science is valued precisely because it is thought to be capable of delivering China from the superstitions and ignorant past that haunts it. Even the harshest critic sometimes came to support detective fiction on the grounds that it could bring the Chinese mind to enlightenment. Hu Shih, for all his objections to modern popular literature, is reported to have recommended the reading of detective fiction, maintaining that it prepared the mind for theoretical studies.⁵⁴

As spokesman for the "literary mind" in the Huo Sang cases, Pao Lang's position, however, is not anti-science: he is more concerned with how science can be misused. In "Hei ti-lao" as well as other stories, Pao points out that science has enabled criminals to improve on their illegal activities.⁵⁶ What has the promise of bringing society to a new age has ironically served to benefit a few. Pao is thus often seen struggling with the question of the

morality of science, a task that, the stories suggest, should be reserved for adherents of the "literary mind."

Obviously, the Huo Sang cases can be and, in fact, have been appreciated on different levels. For shopkeepers who waited eagerly for the latest issue of their favorite detective fiction magazine to reach the bookstore, the Huo Sang cases provided the excitement characteristic of the genre of detective fiction. On the other hand, teachers who considered detective fiction wholesome enough to recommend to students as extra-curricular reading most likely would have seen the same kind of educational value that Ch'eng invests in his works. Moreover, many readers, while remaining on the whole ignorant of the "scientific" thinking practiced by Huo Sang, would nevertheless have felt that they were learning something about their society, its pride and its shame, the challenges it faced and the solutions it reached. This last group, in particular, could perhaps be said to make up those who, in Perry Link's words, "read for comfort."⁵⁶

Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing himself remained curiously ambivalent about the social function of detective fiction. In the essay where he argues in defense of detective fiction, stating that it is a "science textbook in disguise," he adds a disclaimer at the end which dismantles in one stroke what he has painstakingly presented earlier. Detective fiction, he concludes, is, after all, entertainment reading; speculations on other higher purposes are in the end "irrelevant."⁵⁷ In other places, he adopts a more neutral position. Pao Lang is concerned in "Hsüeh-shou-yin" that the Huo Sang cases will produce the unintended and unfortunate result of teaching readers how to evade the law, an accusation that has in fact been directed at detective fiction before. Huo Sang's answer stresses the complete neutrality of the medium. Like science, which can be used to promote or injure the well-being of the human race, detective fiction—or, for that matter, literature in general—is completely devoid of any moral intention.⁵⁸ It is through the collaboration of the reader and the writer that its full import is realized.

Without disputing other readings of the Huo Sang cases, the one that I have presented in the forgoing pages depends on precisely such a collaboration. To reiterate, Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing first of all invests in his two main characters a quasi-independent existence apart from the stories. Second, these characters are made to represent two opposing positions, with their interaction roughly approximating the debate during Ch'eng's time regarding the respective roles of the sciences and the humanities in the construction of

⁵⁵ Ch'eng, "Hei ti-lao", vol. 30, pp. 7-9.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Ch'eng, "Lun Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo," p. 211.

⁵⁵ Ch'eng, "Hei ti-lao," p. 55; "Chin chün ju weng," p. 140.

⁵⁶ See n. 5, above. ⁵⁷ Ch'eng, "Lun Chen-t'an hsiao-shuo," p. 215.

⁵⁸ Ch'eng, "Hsüeh-shou-yin," vol. 29, p. 75.

a new China. These two steps are distinct from each other but go hand in hand. The fact that Huo Sang and Pao Lang are "seemingly real" characters imparts a sense of immediacy and urgency to their arguments. A live dialogue about the future of China thus seems to unfold before the reader's eyes.

This is perhaps why it is difficult to state in simple terms on the basis of the Huo Sang cases Ch'eng's position regarding the preservation of tradition in the face of new challenges in modern China. To conclude that Ch'eng is either progressive or regressive in his views means highlighting one aspect of the Huo Sang cases at the expense of another. Critics generally resolve this dilemma by first of all affirming Ch'eng's progressiveness, then qualifying their conclusion by citing instances of regressive thinking on his part. The latter is often attributed to the "limitations of historical circumstances" to which writers are subject.⁵⁹ In the final analysis, the Huo Sang cases should be seen as a record of Ch'eng's internal negotiations of old and new, rather than a statement of his ideological stance. In this sense, his ambivalence reflects a recognition that both are of value.

⁵⁹ E.g., Fan's "Tan-an" and Liu's discussion of Ch'eng Hsiao-ch'ing in *Yüan-yang hu-tieh p'ai tso-p'in hsüan p'ing*.