

Crime Narratives of Postsocialist China

Yinghong Li

In recent literary studies in the west, the detective genre has caught attention from specialists of different academic fields including fiction, media, and cultural studies. The genre has become an important site of critical contestation for various issues, the “site of every form of critical inquiry and theoretical postulation.”¹⁾ Evidence of the popularity of the crime genre is widely available in the English language. Adding to the expanding corpus of successful crime writers are two Mainland Chinese natives who both emigrated to the west in the post-June Fourth period. Qiu Xiaolong, a Shanghai native turned American resident, is the creator of five Shanghai-based Inspector Chen novels that began appearing in 2000. Diane Wei Liang, a Beijing native turned British resident, has published two volumes in her Beijing-based Private Eye Mei Wang series since 2007. Acclaimed as the Chinese equivalents to Martin Cruz Smith and P. D. James (or Alexander McCall Smith), respectively, the success of Qiu and Liang attests to the popular appeal of the genre and the peculiar charm of the series brought by the fact that the subject matter is from the relatively unfamiliar social territories and cultural milieu of contemporary urban China.²⁾

To lovers of the crime genre, the “exotic” setting of the Far East is maybe an added value or dimension to the norm; to the more serious-minded readers, both series by Qiu and Liang provide a stimulating portrayal of Shanghai and Beijing respectively, the two pillar cities of magnitude that are crucial to China’s entrance into global economic and political arena as a major player. In fact, I would argue in this paper that both series prove that a popular genre like crime fiction can be an effective vehicle for social criticism while retaining its entertainment value.

Critics have been in disagreement regarding the nature of crime fiction, i.e. whether it is essentially a “conservative” genre or has potential for critical examination of social ills. For those who hold disdain for the genre, the sentiment expressed by one of the influential theorists of the genre correctly assesses that “detective fiction is a hymn to culture’s coercive abilities. ... Works in the genre always stand in defense of the established social order.”³⁾ Increasingly in the recent past, however, more critics look at this genre as a valuable source, as a genre of “surpassing durability” that unravels issues of importance to our culture and society.⁴⁾ In other words, it is a genre of worthy of further investigation.⁵⁾

In the past two decades or so, “China Fictions” written in the English language have made an impressive contribution to the world of fiction writing.⁶⁾ Up till the publication of Qiu’s first book in the Inspector Chen series, crime stories about contemporary

China by Chinese writers of the diaspora have been extremely few or non-existent. So the appearance of Qiu and Liang is a welcoming move.

Similarities in the Inspector Chen and the Private Eye Mei Wang series abound. In particular, both capture a schizophrenic tension that exists in the fast changing cityscapes of Shanghai and Beijing. Secondly, both address “thorny” issues by revealing a politics of power that is perhaps impossible had both writers been writing in China or in the Chinese language.⁷⁾ Finally, both carry a particular moral anxiety as Chinese intellectuals who furnish a strong desire to re-enter, if not rectify, two historical moments of recent Chinese history that have not been sufficiently narrativized, that is, the Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the June Fourth democratic movement of 1989. Despite their similar concerns, Qiu and Liang approach their dialectic discourse using models differentiated by their gender, narrative concerns, and strategies.⁸⁾

Changing Cityscape

Modern literature about Mainland China tends toward narrating its expansive countryside rather than urban areas. In the 1990s, however, when postsocialist reform took shape, urban literature became a new hot genre for understandable reasons. In Mainland China, popular writings in this genre primarily focus on the more visible changes in the city. Issues related to the nouveau riche, the white and the pink collar, urban youth culture, daily struggles of the citizen, and life of the migrant worker are the major concern.⁹⁾ Crime writers receive less attention.¹⁰⁾ In fact, western-style crime series have been near non-existent, and still are in Mainland China. It is commonly agreed that modern crime fiction is essentially city-centered. Therefore the crime stories of Qiu and Liang offer a counter-narrative by displaying the darker and deeper layers of city reality that the usual urban narrative fails to present.

Critics have pointed out that the recently emergent urban Chinese literature revolves around the general theme of desire (*yuwang xushi*, narratives of desire).¹¹⁾ Searching for ways to satisfy the unquenchable greed for material wealth and physical pleasure is one engulfing undercurrent of urban life in postsocialist China, and provides endless sources for creative imagination.¹²⁾ This forever expanding urban desire is both the product of and one defining characteristic of urbanization and modernization.

The crime writings of Qiu and Liang also use this general theme as the foundation for their crime stories. In their books, urban city is clearly torn by the desire for anything that is newer, bigger, and fancier no matter what the prize is. Urban schizophrenia is a necessary result of the frantic process of the new encroaching upon the old.

The success story of the Chinese dream in the past three decades is a “grand” narrative that delineates China’s frenzied desire and effort for modernity. As experienced by many countries, the process of modernization is inevitably accompanied by many dark forces that destabilize this process and present a counter-narrative. In the case of China, this counter-narrative is composed of many facets of the sociopolitical, economical and cultural dynamism and a power structure in transformation. The discourse of modernity’s discontents in China promulgates issues sensitive to China’s imminent political propaganda machine and system of censorship. The issue of political

dissidence and the abuse of power, for example, present constant challenge to writers of China who must negotiate with an authoritarian ideology.

In Qiu and Liang, the most visible features in the cityscapes of Shanghai and Beijing are similar and run parallel to each other: a schizophrenic split of the city's identity. The high-rise buildings of glittering exterior mock the humiliatingly backward alleyways of the old neighborhoods. The dichotomist cityscape of the new in contrast to the old reflects a simple reality of China in the 1990s: the entire populace is encapsulated by the frenzy to pursue the Chinese dream, which is measured in monetary terms. Life becomes a huge game of poker with an entirely new set of rules, and everyone is a player regardless of the will. Or at least it seems so on the surface. The undying traditional and the tantalizingly new and exotic become reluctant partners thrown in an unfair game of competition and exposition.

The fundamental components of social structure, family and community, in post-socialist China of the 1990s, experience drastic changes that are more subtle and yet equally shattering as those reflected in the cityscapes. In both Qiu and Liang, the conventional location of the community, the *jiedao*, and the numerous families that reside in them are held together more by a sense of shared fate than the idea of home, whether in terms of ideology or consciousness. As signifier of a rapidly disappearing cultural space, the old neighborhoods have different representational functions in Qiu and Liang.

In Qiu's case, the old *shikumen* neighborhoods are seen as dilapidated and dehumanizing living quarters.¹³⁾ Lack of space, privacy, low standards of hygiene, out-of-date energy supply systems—all of these are causes for constant wrangle and squabble. Yet for the most part, people make do with extraordinary grace and tolerance. In fact, at times Qiu presents these old neighborhoods as a source of moral strength and harmony. In particular Qiu uses the Yu family to symbolize conventional virtues of Chinese culture that are still existent. Detective Yu is Inspector Chen's loyal partner, whose family is cramped into one small room in one *shikumen* house. Inspector Chen finds solace, loyalty, and professional help here. Yu's unquestioning support, his wife Peiqin's feminine insight and intuition, as well as the experiences and righteous beliefs from Yu's father who retired from the police force are crucial to solving each case in the series. The idea of home, as well as traditional wisdoms cherished in Confucianism, are represented strongly by this family whose members have barely enough money to scrape by. *Renqing*, or human sentiments and self-imposed ethical principles, are still valued guidance toward human behavior. The Yu family brings hope, maybe in an idealized manner, to the otherwise bleak situation—a "forgotten" modern ghetto and a sore in the eyes of urban developers.¹⁴⁾

Like Yu, Private Eye Mei Wang's assistant Gupin is a resident of the old Beijing neighborhood *hutong*. Unlike Yu, Gupin is a member of that newly emerging social class, the migrant workers who flock to big cities like Beijing and Shanghai to seek better employment. In Beijing they tend to rent the cheapest places available and end up in the densely populated and often poorly maintained *siheyuan* rooms that fill the *hutong* alleyways. Liang's *hutong* present a more fractured reality in contrast to Qiu's *shikumen*. The old familial structure and communal trust are breaking up. Distrust, alienation and even betrayal have become the norm. Mei's assistant Gupin is one of

the more lucky ones among the millions-large “floating population” who are disrupted from any normal connections with family, community, or work unit. Often, their very being is put on hold, as shown through the character Zhang Hong in *Paper Butterfly*, who struck it rich in the big city but lost his life to a gambling habit. These “imagined” and contingent communities seem hanging in midair, waiting for the final verdict of their fate. Liang clearly empathizes with the loss of warmth, the human touch, as well as the lives that fall through the cracks. Feminine empathy, rather than male ethicizing epistemology, differentiates Liang’s gendered narrative approach from that of Qiu.¹⁵⁾

Qiu and Liang also expose their crime stories from very different angles. The criminals in Inspector Chen series are often high-profiled successful types of men. In *Death of Red Heroine*, Wu Xiaoming is a well-established photographer working for respectful magazines, taking photos of national models and other social luminaries—occupying a central position in the state’s propaganda machine. He is also a recognized artist taking artsy and risqué photos featuring naked women. In *Red Mandarin Dress*, Jia Ming is a famous lawyer known for his passionate defense on behalf of victims of corruption cases. The delineation of the crimes committed and the investigations involved in each case is a story constructed around dozens of characters that form a complicated social network. The narrative moves with tremendous ease to show the intricacies of how these webs of networks are formed and how they are determined by factors of divergent origins, from familial and communal connections to business needs, some contingent others reinforced by necessities of survival—without these social dealings of interactions China’s urban life would be drained of blood. It is a society where interdependency has engendered a new awareness for a changing class-consciousness.

Death of the Red Heroine deals with two particular kinds of persons special to the Chinese reality. Each belongs to a unique social stratum of privileged people. Wu Xiaoming is a member of the so-called HCC, high-rank Party cadres’ children, that extremely privileged parasitic group that enjoys a life of tremendous wealth that comes from purely their “good blood,” as entitlement to the power their fathers have in postsocialist China. The HCC is a synonym of corruption and is an open secret that everyone talks about but no one dares to put a name on. The HCC is a unique social phenomenon that directly points to the weakness and incompleteness of the Chinese political and legal system, as well as a “perverse” defect of the residue of the conventional filial affection gone awry. Wu’s female victim, Guan Hongying (meaning “red heroine”), represents another unique social phenomenon, a member of the national models—exemplary beings chosen and made, or often fabricated, by the Party propaganda machinery for their virtuous behaviors and devoted mindset that serve to glorify party policies and maintain the morale of socialist ideology, or what’s left of it. Like the HCC this is also a privileged “class,” not designated as such but certainly carries an ideological weight that the normal citizen does not.

A murder committed by a HCC on a model citizen presents Chen a dilemma that is uniquely Chinese: the fall of infallible subjects—one is a political symbol, the other a political taboo. How can Inspector Chen manage to purge the mayhem, and restore a sense of justice without tarnishing a symbol and revealing a secret?

Inspector Chen makes up his mind to bring Wu to justice against warnings from all around him, and prepares to sacrifice his own political career. Here Qiu shows a truthful grasp of the situation by pitching Chen against not just the suspect but a much more intangible force, that of the political force behind all the decision making of the most crucial kind. It appears that once a case is designated as “political” the nature of the investigation changes entirely. What makes this novel a Chinese crime novel is the curious and quite frequent communications between Chen and his multiple superiors who relay messages from their superior that will remain permanently nameless and faceless. So the case itself becomes a signifier for tangled political forces struggling to come to consensus about the case.

Desperation is felt strongly when it seems clear that Wu will be protected by his father’s position and Inspector Chen is on his way to being demoted and removed from the case. Qiu’s resolution for the case comes ironically in a parallel that connects Inspector Chen to another HCC, to whom Chen refers as his “last card.” The simple little “connection” is one Chen made during his college years in Beijing, a disrupted love interest. The young woman, known as Ling, has a very ordinary job at the famous Beijing Library and yet has a father who is a member of the most powerful group of all Chinese society, the Politico Bureau. That makes Ling one of the highest of all HCCs.

The outcome of the Wu case is one with many implications and with unanswered questions. Wu is executed shortly after his arrest, which is not made possible by Chen’s finally cracking the forged alibi to confess, but by the sudden takeover of the Internal Security. The case is announced to the public as serving an example of the bad influences young people receive from the west. What justice is served and to what end? This becomes a pattern in other Inspector Chen books. The political case is thus made with two faces and given two verdicts: one is public and official, and the other is truthful and remains hidden.

The exploration of moral issues through characters like Wu and Guan reveal a concern with the changing ethical makeup in postsocialist China. Focusing on the ethos that underline Chen’s cases in this novel and others in the series, Qiu points to the importance of the implementation of judicial laws that treat every citizen in equal terms, or rather, Qiu reveals the difficulties for this to be realized in the case of contemporary China. His model of ethos is one that exposes the defects in China’s judicial system, and reveals the immanent power of hegemonic masculinity that is in the controlling position.

It remains to be seen what final results will come out of Chen’s connection with Ling, who is cast as a pure-hearted woman, a savior goddess for now. As with Peiqin, Qiu idealizes both women figures and projects onto them feminine virtues cherished in conventional Chinese culture.¹⁶⁾ Ling’s ability to initiate crucial moves from crucial players (Chen is eventually called back to the special case team and even promoted) further reveals and ironizes the weakness of the hegemonic patriarchal power structure in China: the rigid system of oligarchy and patriarchy is one vulnerable to currying personal favors.

Law and *Qingli*

In Chinese crime narratives, law and order are often only one end of the political paradigm that requires *qingli* (human feelings pertaining to human relations and common sense) to maintain balance at the other end.¹⁷⁾ Liang's crime narrative tends toward focusing on this important social sentiment crucial to detection work as well as detection narratives in China. *Qingli* is the compendium aspect to the legal element in crime investigation in China, the definitive component to solving crimes.¹⁸⁾ Focusing on this less "tangible" side of crime investigation might also explain the fact that Liang's *Eye of Jade* does not read like a crime story most of the time. This, however, does not mean that Mei Wang deals with crimes of lesser consequences.

Just the opposite, the main criminal in *Eye of Jade* is a very high-ranking official who has the power to decide "the life and death of ordinary people." However, instead of locating the abuse of power as the central "crime" of her novel, Liang approaches the case from a peripheral position. Rather than dealing with central players in the police force, or major government offices as Chen does, Mei maneuvers around commoners like herself. She exposes the incompetence and incompleteness of the Chinese judicial system by focusing on the workings and effects of *qingli* as well as of *renqing*. Thus, the high-ranking official's criminality is "confessed" face to face to Mei, who is not a cop and has no judicial power to bring him to justice. Song admits his abuse of power results directly from a paternal feeling, a sentiment considered obligatory in the Chinese cardinal ethic relations. To help, or save the life of one's son, even though that son might be a criminal, is necessary to fulfill the reciprocal part of the filial relationship from the father's position.

The narrative is further complicated when the criminal Song is connected to Mei's own mother: both were implicated in many ways during that dark time of the Cultural Revolution when both worked as spies for the State Security. Decades later, when death comes close to catching Mei's mother, Song emerges to save her life by casually abusing his high position. This makes him the savior of Mei's mother, as well as Mei—they are forever indebted to him.

Eye of Jade essentially is a narrative of self-discovery and female development. The secrets that begin to emerge from Song's sudden appearance in Mei's life leads Mei to re-question her own father's death, her mother's life history, and eventually her own identity. Through the recovery of memories of a traumatic past, the novel offers a different kind of social criticism that points to not only the weakness of judicial system and the fallacy of politics, but also to the hypocrisy of the human heart. The real story of the book becomes a mother-daughter narrative that puts the mother figure under inquisitive lights in suspicious situations. It is a typical narrative of that time with a major theme of betrayal, survival, deceit, greed, and desire for redemption.

In comparison to Mei's doubt and suspicion toward the meanings of maternal love and her own identity, Inspector Chen suffers from an existential crisis of identity all along. Both are not strong heroes sustained by any ideological beliefs. Rather, through their consciousness, the reader is presented with a strong sense of angst, doubt, and despair that are the defining qualities of the mind of the dissent of post-socialist China. And yet both Chen and Mei are realistic in the dealings with their cases: they know the limitations imposed on them, and ultimately they could only base their

decisions according to common decency and humanism.

Although about a decade of time separates Qiu and Liang into two generations of Chinese intellectuals, they both grew up witnessing the last two devastating traumas of twentieth-century China, that is, the Cultural Revolution and the June Fourth student movement.¹⁹⁾ Qiu's *Red Mandarin Dress* and Liang's *Eye of Jade* are deliberate efforts to readdress the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, or the lingering and potent effect, of this trauma. Liang also uses her *Paper Butterfly* to "exorcise the ghost" from the June Fourth massacre which is obviously deeply inscribed in her own psyche, as well as that of her heroine.²⁰⁾

The pursuit of the Chinese dream in postsocialist China sweeps through China like an unstoppable "juggernaut."²¹⁾ The forward-moving machinery leaves hardly any space for further reflection or introspection of the disasters committed under the pretense and protection of "political correctness" and violence performed with false conscience. They have become dissonant memories intentionally forgotten or repressed. And yet the ghosts come back in various forms, often with destructive potential.

The return of the repressed assumes the form of residue desire centered around the mother figure in *Eye of Jade*, and unconsciously unveils a hidden narrative structure that rattles the seemingly content though not perfect middle-class Beijing family. Mei's father was a writer who died insane in the labor camp in the Cultural Revolution. Song's appearance makes Mei question if her mother had anything to do with her father's death. A stroke puts her mother in the hospital and she remains mostly non-verbal after the recovery.

The mother's "silence" signifies a difficult subject position in the effort to reconstruct a past, to fulfill the yearnings for the lost family and thus homeland. Both Mei Wang books follow a similar elegiac tone and narrative structure that allow the hidden ruptures in the familial relationship, the dented *renqing* among close family members, between parent and child, husband and wife, to expose themselves. In this way the text problematizes the representations of fundamental cultural values that are undergoing profound transformation in Chinese society.

The unconscious return of the repressed memories of the Cultural Revolution assumes a much more violent force in Qiu's *Red Mandarin Dress*. Like *Eye of Jade*, the reactivation of the dark memories associated with the Cultural Revolution is kindled by a desire for revenge. In *Eye of Jade* the revenge plot is contained in the narrative of remembrance and construction of the past. In *Red Mandarin Dress*, revenge is a much more destructive force that motivates the crime. It is, however, based on a distorted memory of the past, a misreading of a crucial plot in the memory story that also centers on the mother figure and relies on a demonization of the mother figure.

In this novel, Qiu experiments with a different mode of representation for the Cultural Revolution narrative that interrogates the psychological realities of the individual who has been severely traumatized. Qiu unravels the crime of the story through the lens of a Chinese Oedipus complex, or sexual repression. The novel is an ambitious project to reposition a deeply wounded and diseased male subjectivity. It intertwines with the discourse of the performance of identity and the relation of subconscious psychosexual dynamics and sociopolitical milieu of postsocialist China. It also makes efficient use of the trope of the female body.

The criminal of this novel, Jia Ming, is a successful lawyer for defending victims in high profile cases involving corrupt party officials. Jia's success, however, is driven by a secret obsession to avenge the Cultural Revolution. This obsession, as with many other such traumatic associations of memories and experiences of the time, is a misguided force that ultimately finds its release in self-destruction. The story of a successful attorney turns into a serial killer who commits sex crimes without sexual violations is a drama that problematizes the postsocialist Chinese male subject as either a rational or stable entity or an individual. Having already lost his father to the violence of the Cultural Revolution, Jia was traumatized when witnessing the naked sexual act of his mother engaged with a stranger male. The latter experience is a different sort of violence that shatters the adolescent Jia's secret love for his mother, a longing to remain in the warm, protective, and feminine utopia that is constructed and symbolized by his mother.

The adolescent self fails to comprehend the nature of the violence. But by resorting to demonizing the pure mother figure and annihilating his own manhood (Jia is sexually impotent), the pure disgust and repulsion of his mother's and therefore women's naked body is also mixed with a hatred of the male violator of that body. Jia therefore associates that male figure with the evilness of the Cultural Revolution.

In the novel, avenging through sociopolitical or economic means is easily performed. Yet to evoke and repulse a ghost of psychosexual dynamism is a task far more dangerous and complex. Here Qiu rightly taps into a social cultural area that is not exactly a taboo, but tends to be highly sensitive. The novel is perhaps the first serious effort to delineate this problem. It seems reasonable to assume, emotionally and psychologically, that crimes of this nature do exist in postsocialist China where the surplus of "libidinal economy" has become a powerful force to be reckoned with.

The female body has become again a place of contestation for power struggle and a signifier for male domination monetarily and sexually. The red mandarin dress that Jia dresses his female corpses in is a metonymic and parodic attempt at drawing attention to the underlying forces embedded in a collective nostalgic longing of the glamour and glory of the colonial mindset of Shanghai through the exotic female body.²²⁾

Interestingly, Qiu arranges a parallel plot for Inspector Chen to embark upon an academic endeavor aimed at disclosing a tendency in the collective unconscious of Chinese culture, that is, the tendency to demonize beautiful women in classic love tales. This deconstructive reading of conventional Chinese romance invites the reader to deconstruct Jia's personal story as well as the novel itself in a similar fashion. The novel ends with Jia's self-annihilating act in the highly symbolic place of the courtroom where he realizes he is given the chance to win his case by higher authorities in Beijing, making him another exemplar figure for a political case against corruption. And yet to Chen and the readers of the novel, it is his secret identity as a serial killer that further complicates the case. In the end, his secret is sealed with Chen's faith to Jia's humanity - that he is as much a victim as a killer. As in *Death of Red Heroine*, the problem remains with the labeling of the case: what kind of explanation should be given to the public? How much of Jia's crime can be revealed to the public without damaging his righteous political image? Qiu's novel is one of a very few that honestly inscribes the many darkly entangled stories of the Cultural Revolution narrative, and

simultaneously points to the near impossibility of truthfully engaging with this discourse.

Liang's *Paper Butterfly* deals with a similarly problematic return: the silent victims of the June Fourth massacre of 1989. Like Jia, Lin, who was imprisoned for his participation in that student generated movement, experienced a trauma so devastating that he could only comprehend it through the means of revenge. At the center of this trauma is the betrayal of Lin's best friend Fatty from childhood. Like Jia, Lin also lost his parents to the insanity of the Cultural Revolution, but unlike Jia, Lin seems able to find a way to "exorcise" his secret ghost when he becomes enthused by the fever of 1989. Liang takes a similar approach in this novel as in *Eye of Jade*. Instead of probing the political formations and implications of that failed democratic movement, she focuses on the loss of innocence violently imposed on that generation of rebellious children by the invincible patriarchal authority and the profound sadness that this loss confers on the caged, silenced, and wounded male subject.

June Fourth 1989 is understood as a pivotal marker in the ending of the post-Mao era and the full scale embracing of the new capitalist socialism, or socialist capitalism. Like Qiu's *Red Mandarin Dress*, Liang sees the discourse of many of the unpleasant returns of the repressed past as a necessary force of disruption in the grand narrative of economic empowerment of urban China of the 1990s. In other words, these dark forces deserve to be reckoned with as part and parcel to the health of the psychological being of the collective unconscious of the new Chinese identity.

This project of evocating and repulsing the political ghost, as shown by both Qiu and Liang, involves as much official reassessment and retrospection of the regime as individual reflection and introspection. That in both Qiu and Liang this personal memory and experience of the traumatic past takes the form of revenge indicates that the damaging impact of that past still lingers. Eventually Lin ends up in a different and yet essentially similar situation as that of Jia: a self-annihilation. Unlike Jia, Lin is unable to materialize his revenge and goes back to prison. This time his ego is further scared by the loss of his loved one to the mundane desire for material comfort: the pursuit of the quotidian and plebeian further ironizes the fall of the political hero of the previous decade. The exuviation of ideology is complete. The ending of the novel thus reveals no more truths, restores no more justice but brings forth new questions. The real meaning slips away as the text destabilizes, leaving only the paper butterfly as a sure signifier of an elegiac mourning and maybe good luck wish.

The ending of *Red Mandarin Dress* and *Paper Butterfly* are in a way similar. Both are forced to contemplate with only an aesthetic resolution. Jia Ming's poem written to Inspector Chen is partially a confession of his crime. Silence will be the only witness to an insinuated agreement between Chen and Jia under a most unusual circumstance, that both understand that the real "crime" lies somewhere else, for which the serial murders are only one delayed symptom. The real "crime" of the Cultural Revolution needs to remain in a semi-dormant form. The final image of *Paper Butterfly* is the beautiful paper-cut butterfly whose fragile beauty also testifies to the silenced cry for the tragedy of an injustice done to a young fragile mind, or in that sense a generation of young and fragile, though passionate, minds that were doomed for immature death or annihilation. It is therefore the duty of those few lucky ones that could escape from

that tragedy to at least voice that injustice, if not rectify it. Mei, and hence, Liang, regards herself as one of those lucky ones.

In essence Liang is never concerned about approaching her crime stories as puzzles that need solutions. Her pathos model of representation resists neat and logic construction of puzzles.²³⁾ She also prefers no-solutions or open endings. In fact, she uses the trope of crime fictions to deliver a millennium lamentation on the disintegration of human relationships and emotions, the erosion of social fabric at the service of a new form of ideology that renders these conventional sentiments as ghosts and lost souls. Mei's private eye business is thus built upon an ambivalent attitude toward seeking justice: showing that the discourse of crime and detection is fraught with ambiguities and anxieties. In comparison, the ethos that permeates the Inspector Chen series seemingly puts more emphasis on revealing truth and restoring justice. And yet again and again, Chen's cases are "hijacked" by a higher political authority to fulfill absurd political destinations and propaganda. The discourse here is also one full of ironies and ambiguities, signified by Chen's existential query of his own identity and the meaning of his work. In a sense both *Red Mandarin Dress* and *Paper Butterfly* can be read as attempts at deconstructing a dialectic of the "crime" of political repression that occurred in China's recent past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a popular genre, crime narratives have much untapped potential, as powerfully demonstrated by Qiu and Liang. Serious questions can be exposed in this genre to the benefit of intellectual inquiry.²⁴⁾ In spite of the innate ineptitude for reforming political or legal systems that are the root cause for injustices portrayed in the narratives or outside, both crime series successfully evoke the millennium milieu of urban China with a peculiar sense of urgency mixed with a nostalgic melancholy. Both writers successfully negotiate their culturally specific materials with a popular narrative form that originates in the western tradition.²⁵⁾ For the most part, they also effectively resist exoticizing or orientalizing their subject matter. Their effort to realistically represent the postsocialist condition in China is plausible and even admirable at times.

Notes

- 1) Jerome H. Delamater, "Theoretical Approaches to the Genre," in Ruth Prigozy ed., *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 2.
- 2) To measure non-native English writers against successful western writers is a consistent practice of the media in the West as well as in China. This potentially orientalist attitude is a problematic beyond the scope of this paper.
- 3) Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 125.
- 4) Martin Swales, "Introduction," in Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales, and Robert Vilain eds., *The Art of Detective Fiction*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), xii.
- 5) Very few academic studies exist that focus on crime writing in China. One recent full-length study is Jeffrey Kinkley, *Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Novels discussed in this book are those published prior to 1990s.
- 6) "China Fictions" is in the title of a new book on writings by Chinese writers of diaspora, see A. Robert Lee ed., *China Fictions/English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, (Amsterdam and

- New York: Rodopi, 2008).
- 7) Being diaspora writers writing in the English language, Qiu and Liang enjoy a great advantage that Mainland Chinese writers do not have: the freedom from a rigid censor system. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that precisely because of this outsider-within position and freedom, both writers are able to tackle obviously politically sensitive issues in their crime series. One example is when Qiu's novels were translated into Chinese, significant changes were forced, including changing Shanghai to "H City." See Howard W. French, "A Writer Trying to Solve His Own Mysteries, and China's," *International Herald Tribune*, April 6, 2007.
 - 8) Books in the Inspector Chen series include: *Death of Red Heroine* (2000); *Loyal Character Dance* (2003); *When Red is Black* (2004); *A Case of Two Cities* (2006); and *Red Mandarin Dress* (2007). The first three volumes are published by Soho Press, the last two by St. Martin's Minotaur. Books in the Private Eye Mei Wang series are *Paper Butterfly* (2007), published by Pan Macmillan Australia, and *Eye of Jade* (2008), published by Simon and Schuster.
 - 9) One of the comprehensive studies on Chinese urban literature is a collection of articles published recently in Mainland China. Refer to Yang Honghai ed., *Quanqihua Yujing xia de Dangdai Dushi Wenxue*, (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2007).
 - 10) There are no substantial academic articles written on Qiu Xiaolong or Diane Wei Liang, to my knowledge. For some background information regarding both authors, refer their own website. For Qiu, see <http://www.qiuxiaolong.com>. For Liang, see <http://www.dianeweiliang.com>.
 - 11) *Yuwang xushi* is one of the key terms that appear often in different articles in *Quanqihua Yujing xia de Dangdai Dushi Wenxue*. One example is Li Fengliang, "Dushi, Wenxue, Xiandaixing," 59–69.
 - 12) For a most comprehensive discussion of the term "postsocialist China" refer to Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 204–210.
 - 13) *Shikumen* houses are two or three-story townhouses, with the front yard protected by a high brick wall. Each residence is connected and arranged in straight alleys.
 - 14) It is interesting to point out that in recent years there has been a nation-wide renewal of interest in Confucianism in Mainland China. One of the best-known popular writers that came out around few years ago is Yu Dan, whose book on reading Confucius has been a bestseller.
 - 15) This gender difference in crime writing is observed in Sabine Vanacker, "V. I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta: Creating a Feminist Detective Hero," in Peter B. Messent ed., *Criminal Proceedings: Contemporary American Crime Novel*, (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 80–83.
 - 16) Qiu admits that Peiqin is his favorite character in these books, and that he de-idealizes her in the latter volumes. See At Home Online with Mystery Readers International at <http://www.mysteryreaders.org/athomeqiu.html>. Retrieved August 10, 2008.
 - 17) For more discussion on this, refer to "Minzuhua jincheng zhong de Zhentan Xiaoshuo," in Fan Boqun and Kong Qingdong eds., *Tongsu Wenxue Shiwu Jiang*, (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2003), 191–206.
 - 18) See "Minzuhua jincheng zhong de Zhentan Xiaoshuo," especially 199.
 - 19) A relatively big but ultimately not so impressive corpus of literature exists in Mainland China that "reflect" on the tragedies experienced by individuals during the Cultural Revolution. Only a notable few exist in the English language. Narratives on the June Fourth movement are very rare. Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* is the most recent addition to the English corpus.
 - 20) In an interview Liang talks extensively about her own experience in the June Fourth movement. See "Zhuanfang Nuzuoqia Liang Wei," *Minbao*, June 7, 2007.
 - 21) Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 139. The term "juggernaut" is also discussed by R. Gordon Kelly in *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life*, (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 2.
 - 22) Interestingly, it is also during the 1990s when Mainland Chinese women writers began to seriously address issues important to the female experience such as identity, agency, and pleasure through the discourse of the female body. The extreme monetary success of "beauty writers" flagged by Wei Hui and Mian Mian testifies to a public hunger for female erogenous confession. Many studies have appeared on the phenomenon of body writing. For one recent study refer to Lu, *Chinese Modernity and*

Global Biopolitics, 39–53.

- 23) The terms “moral model” and “cultural model” are used in Fan Boqun and Kong Qingdong eds., *Tongsu Wenxue Shiwu Jiang*, (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2003), 200.
- 24) From the academic point of view, both series provide supple materials that will benefit the “previously under-researched genre of Chinese crime fiction,” as noted by Colin Hawes in “Jeffrey Kinkley. Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China,” *China Review International*, vol. 9 no. 2, (2002), 474.
- 25) Critics point out that modern crime fiction in Chinese was directly influenced by translations of western crime narratives. For a discussion from historical perspectives, refer to Ren Xiang, *Zhentan Xiaoshuo Shilun—Wenxue de Lingyidao Fengjing*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 2001), 1–2. See also Fan Boqun and Kong Qingdong eds., *Tongsu Wenxue Shiwu Jiang*, 195.