

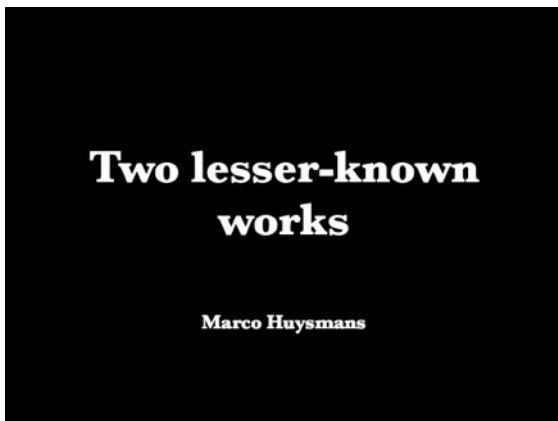
# Two lesser-known works

Marco Huysmans

Deze nieuwsbrief bevat de integrale tekst en de slides van de presentatie die ik heb mogen geven in het kader van de conferentie *The Dutch Mandarin: Robert van Gulik's place in contemporary Chinese Culture*, gehouden op 20 april te Shanghai.

For the first story, I invite you to join me on an expedition into history to find the origins of Van Gulik as a writer of mystery fiction. Our point of departure is 1951, the year in which the first Judge Dee novel was published.

法官狄



1951

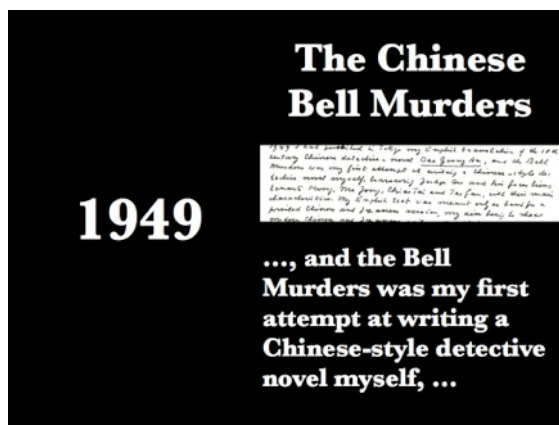
你好 Ni Hao – Good afternoon; my name is Marco Huysmans.

The title was *Meiro no satsujin* (迷路の殺人), or *The Chinese Maze Murders*, and it was published in Japan by Kōdansha (株式会社講談社).

Let me start by saying how very honoured I am to be standing here today in the company of so many eminent scholars and distinguished guests who share my admiration of that great man, Robert van Gulik.

But this wasn't the first Judge Dee novel Van Gulik wrote. In his *Remarks on my Judge Dee novels* he explicitly states that his first attempt at writing a Chinese-style novel was *The Chinese Bell Murders*, written in 1949.

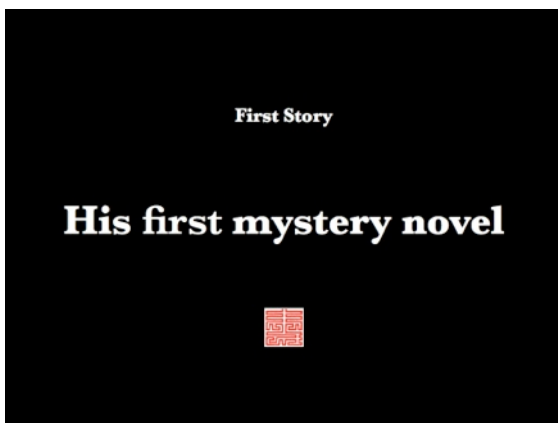
I myself am not a scholar, so I will not be treating you to deep insights into Van Gulik's scientific work like previous speakers. Instead, I would like to try and entertain you with two stories about Van Gulik's earliest efforts as an author.



1949

For your amusement, I will try to pronounce some of the Chinese titles that occur in this presentation. I will probably fail miserably, for which I sincerely apologise beforehand. Chinese is a very difficult language, unless of course your name is Van Gulik.

However, he found this novel difficult to get published because the villain of the piece is the abbot of a Buddhist monastery. At that particular time, Buddhism was rather popular in Japan, so a story about a depraved and murderous Buddhist abbot could hardly be expected to become a bestseller. His publisher wouldn't touch it, and that's why Van Gulik decided to write *The Chinese Maze Murders* instead. The *Bell Murders* wasn't published until 1955.



Yet, even *The Chinese Bell Murders* isn't the first mystery novel Van Gulik wrote.



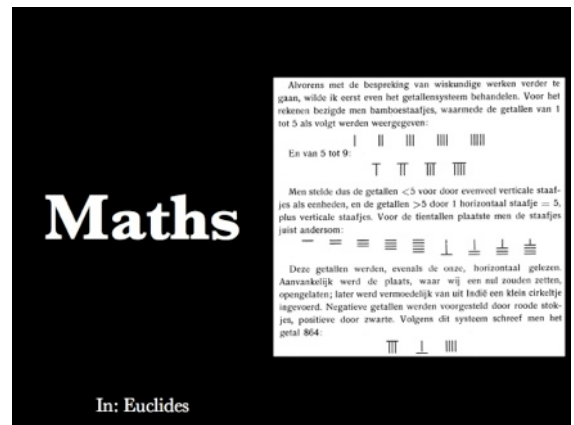
And neither is the famous *Dee Goong An*, a translation of an ancient Chinese work called *Wu Ze-tian si da qi-an* (武则天四大奇案). Actually, it's only a partial translation. Our conference chairman, Prof. Idema, wrote a very interesting article on this subject. Its intriguing title is: *The Mystery of the Halved Judge Dee Novel* and it was published in 1974 in a Dutch literary magazine.

To find the very first mystery novel Van Gulik wrote, we have to go back in time even further. In 1930 Van Gulik entered Leiden University to study Chinese, Japanese and Law. He was looking forward to years of living a student's life, lots of parties, and so on. But fate had something completely different in store for him.

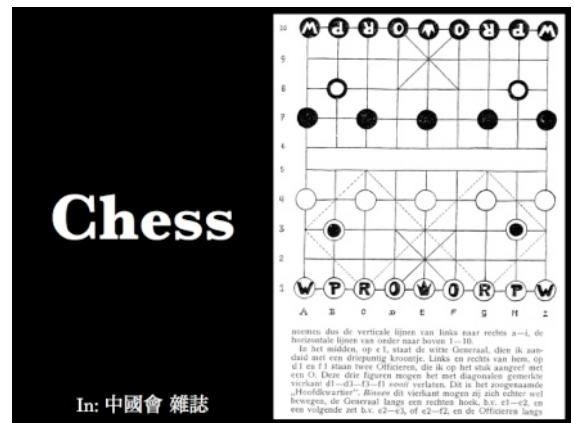


Within a month he met Nellie Remouchamps, a widow who was 18 years his senior and had a son aged seven. Soon, he moved in with her. To the outside world he was just her lodger, but in reality they were practically living together as husband and wife. This lasted for five very happy years. Then Van Gulik left for Japan, and as they were saying goodbye Nellie told him never to write or try to see her again. He never did. Nellie died ten years later, during the Second World War.

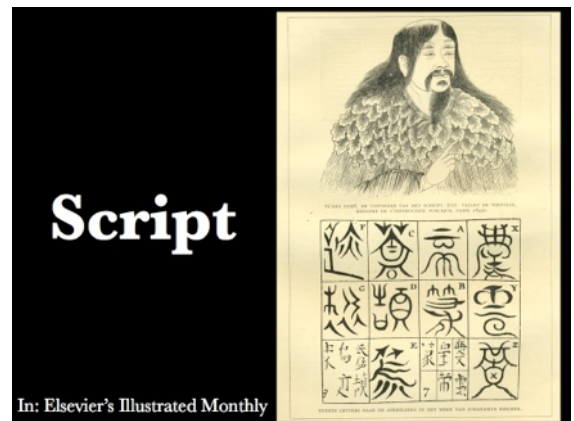
In those five happy years, Van Gulik managed to graduate and get a PhD in Eastern Literature and Philosophy, both with top honours. To earn himself a livelihood and augment Nellie's small pension, he wrote a number of articles for several Dutch magazines. I will just name a few to show you the breadth of his interest:



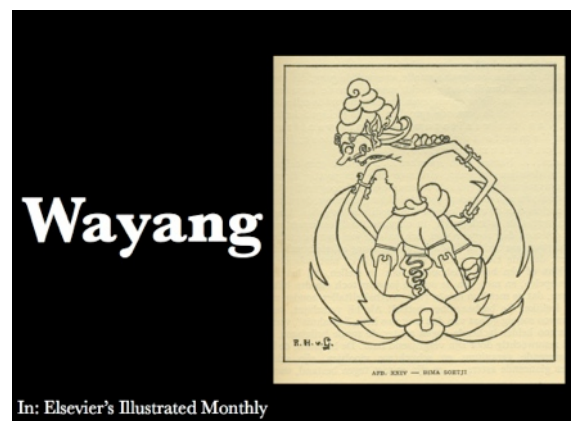
*The Mathematical Conception of the Ancient Chinese,*



*Chinese Chess,*



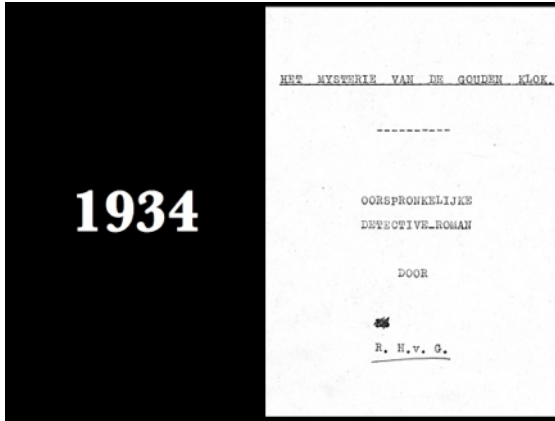
*Realisation of the Unreal in Chinese Script,*



and *Eastern Shadows* (about the ancient Indonesian art of Wayang).

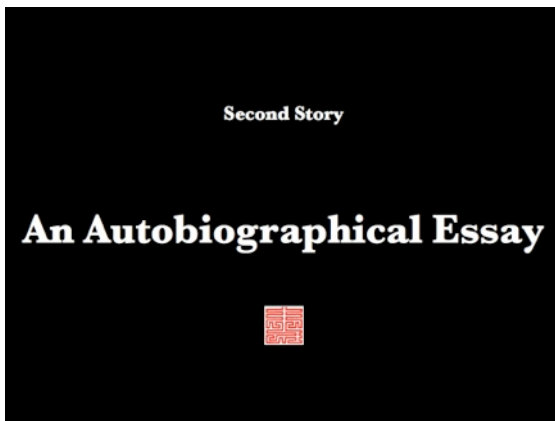
But on top of all this scientific work and having a family to provide for, he found time and energy for yet another endeavour which came to nothing at the time but would play such an important role in his life many years later.

A few years ago, an interesting discovery was made by Thomas van Gulik. In his father's archive he discovered a complete typescript dated 1934 of



an “original detective novel” by R.H. v. G. (Robert Hans van Gulik) entitled *Het Mysterie van de Gouden Klok*, or *The Mystery of the Golden Bell*. It was quite a surprise to see that his interest in writing detective novels dated from way before he had ever discovered Judge Dee. Yet, China plays an important role in this novel too. Though it is set in Rotterdam and the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia), a major part is played by Chinese secret societies.

I feel privileged to be one of the few people on this earth who has actually read it. It may not be the greatest mystery novel ever written, but I found it to be quite a gripping story. Hopefully the Van Gulik Estate at some point can be persuaded to allow this first effort, this sign of things to come, to be published.



The second story, like the first, is a kind of voyage; but its destination is very different.

Robert van Gulik was a man of the mind. His writings are scientific, rational, logical. Hardly

ever does he allow his feelings to come into it. Hardly ever does he allow the reader into his personal life. For instance, he loved gibbons. In fact, his oldest son Willem stated that he had only seen his father cry once, and that was when one of his beloved gibbons died. Yet, how did Van Gulik express this love? He wrote the scientific treatise that Prof. Shi talked about, *The Gibbon in China*, finishing it literally on his deathbed.

Van Gulik hardly ever wrote about his feelings; but there is one notable exception. My second story is a journey to his heart.



It starts in Japan in 1935. Soon after his arrival in Tokyo, Van Gulik met Okaya Katsuyo, or “Kachan” for short. She moved in with him, defining her role as “the maid that enjoys the favours of her master”. She taught him about intricate Japanese customs, social patterns, and their way of life in general. During the New Year’s Holiday of 1935–36 he took her on a trip to the famous spa of Odawara.

In 1936, Van Gulik wrote an essay about this experience called *The Hot Springs of Odawara*.



The original English version was never published, but a slightly abbreviated Dutch version appeared in Elsevier’s Illustrated Monthly in February 1937 and was later reprinted in a collection of writings by Dutch diplomats.

*The Hot Springs of Odawara* is unlike anything Van Gulik has ever written. It is profoundly personal, allowing us a glimpse of his

private life with Kachan, showing us the extent of his affection for her. Van Gulik emphasises this by not writing *about* her, but by writing as if he is speaking to her, addressing her. This for instance is what Van Gulik writes when they are sharing a hot bath.

As we are lying there motionless  
I am grateful for your blessed gift of silence.  
The drops in your blue-black tresses  
are like so many pearls.

Yet, *The Hot Springs of Odawara* also deals with the big questions of life. Or perhaps I should say: THE big question, the question of the Meaning of Life.

The next day Van Gulik and Kachan visit a historic site, long ago the scene of an important battle. It is raining. The hustle and bustle of those belligerent times has gone. What remains is the rustle of the century-old cypresses. Van Gulik is reminded of a haiku the poet Bashō wrote when visiting such an ancient battlefield.

The summer grass, the summer grass  
All that is left of the warrior's dreams

Van Gulik writes:

... all the time I hear Bashō's poem in the back of my mind. It becomes the nagging refrain to a monotonous song of the transitoriness of all things.

The next day they are preparing to return home in a despondent mood. Suddenly Van Gulik becomes aware of the continuous murmur of the springs. It makes him realise the futility of trying "to have and to hold".

... lasting possession is only possible  
through complete renunciation.

He later described this realisation as a "sudden revelation", what Zen-Buddhism calls 無 *wu*. From then on, so he claims, he saw China from within, and could read Chinese texts without translating them mentally.

By now, I've read this essay many times over. It never fails to put the troubles of my life into perspective, to put my mind at ease.

When I was invited to attend this conference, I decided I should do something special for the occasion. The idea was born to create a special edition of *The Hot Springs of Odawara*. Alongside the English original, I wanted to include a Chinese translation as a way of paying homage to the culture Van Gulik loved so dearly, and to allow the Chinese people to read this wonderful essay in their own language. So I asked Prof. Shi if she was aware of a Chinese translation. She wasn't, but she immediately offered to translate the essay herself. I gladly accepted, knowing that no-one could be more suitable for this task than Prof. Shi, being an expert in ancient Chinese literature as well as so many different aspects of Robert van Gulik's work.

2013

THE HOT SPRINGS  
OF ODAWARA



ROBERT VAN GULIK

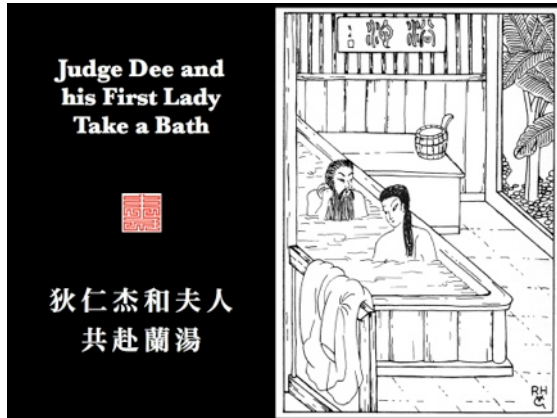
ROBERT VAN GULIK

小田原の温泉

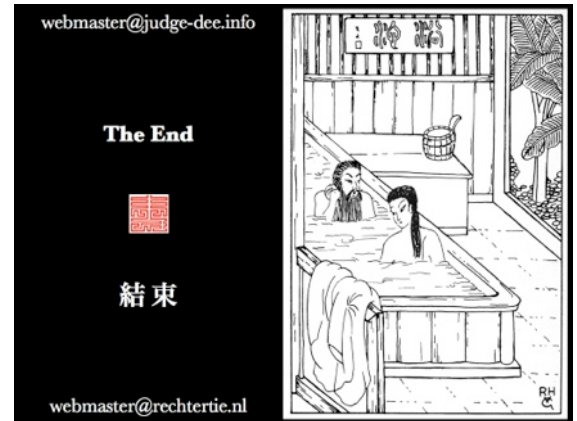
So now, by kind permission of the Van Gulik Estate, I proudly announce the first official publication of *The Hot Springs of Odawara* containing both the original English version and a brand-new Chinese translation.

If you are interested in obtaining a complimentary copy of this booklet, please contact me during or after the conference. I sincerely hope you will be as moved by *The Hot Springs of Odawara* as I am.

Just one more thing... I am rather fond of puzzles, so I have a little teaser for you, my esteemed audience. There is one illustration in the booklet, taken from the Judge Dee novel *The Lacquer Screen*.



It is not quite right, though. I've had to alter it just a little bit to fit in with the theme of the essay. I'm sure Robert van Gulik wouldn't have minded. As Prof. Cahill explained in 2003, it is possible, or even probable, that Van Gulik himself played us some tricks in his *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*. Anyway, the first person who can explain to me which feature of this illustration is not strictly original, gets an extra special copy of the booklet.



Thank you very much for your attention.

高羅佩

