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"IT WAS ABOUT A CHINESE IDOL" Murder and the Empire in Fergus Hume's *The Golden Wang-ho*

SILVIA GRANATA
UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

Abstract - This essay focuses on Fergus Hume's 1901 novel *The Golden Wang-ho*, whose most striking character is the Chinese monk Jinfou. At the time of its publication, China was at the forefront of international news, with the Boxer uprising, the rescue of the Beijing Legation quarter, and the ongoing tension among the Western powers on the still doubtful fate of the Qing empire. It is likely that Hume meant to capitalise on the public's interest with a China-themed story, but his text also offers an intriguing example of the formal and ideological flexibility of turn-of-the-century crime fiction. In particular, the depiction of Jinfou, combined with the representation of other characters variously involved in the imperial project, conveys a multi-layered image of Britain's engagement overseas, which is further reinforced by the comments of the narrator. I suggest that, in this work, Hume plays with current stereotypes about crime and ethnicity, challenging readerly expectations both through his plot twists and his formal choices.

Keywords: Fergus Hume; *The Golden Wang-ho*; Empire; Crime fiction; China.

1. Introduction

Fergus Hume (Ferguson Wright Hume, 1859-1932) is mostly known today for the novel that made him famous, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, published in Melbourne in 1886 and one year later in London. The steps leading to the creation of his best-selling work were briefly detailed by Hume himself in the preface to the revised edition of 1896: in the hope that a successful novel might boost his career as a playwright, he gathered information about the books that sold the most, read Émile Gaboriau's, and produced his masterpiece; when *The Mystery* came out, it reached impressive sales almost overnight.[1] Hume then moved to England and continued to write for the rest of his life. He remained a popular author throughout the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth century, producing more than a hundred novels and short stories, but never reached a success comparable to that of his first murder mystery.

The remarkable popularity of *The Mystery of a Hanson Cab* placed it on the map of crime fiction criticism, even though in a somewhat uncomfortable position. Early analyses struggled to explain its success, partly reflecting the mixed opinions of Victorian critics (Caterson 2012, p. xvii). As noted by Clarke, the novel was dismissed as an anomaly, since it did not fit in the narrow path that was being delineated for the history of the genre – mostly based on a small group of works identified as canonical – which foregrounded its conservativism and its reassuring emphasis on the restoration of order achieved through the efforts of a competent, and benevolent, detective (Clarke 2014, pp. 45-47). More

[1] A detailed account of the publication of *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, together with a discussion of its much-debated sales figures, is provided by Sussex 2015.

recent critical contributions,[2] however, re-evaluated *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* exactly because of those very same features that had caused its previous exclusion from the canon: its "formal diversity and moral ambiguity" have been thoroughly investigated, contributing to the wider project of rediscovering overlooked works, expanding traditional accounts of the genre, and tracing a more inclusive, and accurate, history of crime fiction (Clarke 2014, p. 47; see also Clarke 2020, pp. 4-8).

Yet, criticism of Hume's literary output has chiefly focused on his most famous novel, while the rest of his extensive production remains largely unexplored.[3] While it is true that many of his subsequent works display a conspicuous repetitiveness (which is understandable when considering that, at his most productive, he could write five or six novels a year), Hume's other narratives are not void of interest, and would deserve some critical scrutiny.

This essay focuses on a novel Hume published in 1901, *The Golden Wang-ho*, whose most striking character is the Chinese monk Jinfou.[4] At the time of its publication, China was at the forefront of international news, with the Boxer uprising, the rescue of the Beijing Legation quarter in the summer of 1900, and the ongoing tension among the Western powers on the still doubtful fate of the Qing empire. It is likely that Hume meant to capitalise on the public's interest with a China-themed story, but his text also offers an intriguing example of the formal and ideological flexibility of turn-of-the-century crime fiction.

This is especially evident in the depiction of Jinfou, who is presented at first as a potential arch-villain, but turns out to be far more complex, and intriguing, than that; as I discuss below, such ambiguity acquires even more resonance if situated alongside other contemporary representations of Chinese characters in popular fiction. But the questioning of received roles does not stop there: a complementary overturning of expectations also applies to the British characters who seem initially best placed to provide a solution to the mysteries presented in the story, but prove to be ineffective at best. These narrative choices certainly make the novel more interesting; yet, when read within the story's imperial background, they also convey a multi-layered, possibly disturbing image of Britain's engagement overseas, which is further reinforced by the comments of the narrator. The analysis of the text, considered within the context of late-century mystery literature, thus aims at exploring how Hume engaged with current debates by playing with stereotypes about crime and ethnicity, challenging readerly expectations both through his plot twists and his formal choices.

2. *The Golden Wang-ho*: mysteries, secrets and crimes

The first element that strikes the reader in *The Golden Wang-ho* is the emphasis on multiplication: of mysteries, of potential detective figures, of criminals, and of objects. The novel opens with the return home of Leonard Jayne, a Lieutenant who has served for

[2] See Clarke 2014, pp. 43-71; Kipperman 2008, pp. 129-136; Pittard 2011, pp. 27-62; Rolls 2019, pp. 45-59.

[3] An exception is represented by the collection of short stories *Hagar of the Pawn Shop*, syndicated in various magazines in 1897 and then published in volume form (1898), which has been discussed, among others, by Clarke 2020, pp. 85-107 and Kestner 2011, pp. 107-119.

[4] The novel was published in instalments on various newspapers as *The Golden Idol*. In the volume edition the title was changed into *The Golden Wang-ho*, possibly to avoid confusion with another novel with the same title, *The Golden Idol* (subtitled *A Story of Adventure by Sea and Land*) by Joyce Emmerson Preston Muddock (1899).

two years in China. Waiting for him on the pier are his fiancée, Norah Wharton, her younger sister Fancy, and a family friend, Teddy. A ragged, one-eyed Chinese man is lurking about; he seems to be unduly interested in Leonard, but then disappears. Once they get home, Leonard gives Norah a present, a six-inch gold idol that he received from a dying pirate. Notwithstanding its "immortal ugliness" (p. 21), Norah takes a liking to the idol, which she names 'The Boojum', as Lewis Carroll's character. They also notice that the idol resembles a figure painted on a huge jar standing in the Whartons' house,[5] which had been looted at the Summer Palace; both objects are inscribed with the same Chinese characters, but since no one can read them, the idol is dismissed – for the moment – as an exotic curiosity. On the next day, Leonard cannot be found; his disappearance is thus the first mystery to be solved.

A second enigma concerns a document left by Jim, Leonard's father (and Norah's uncle), who recently died. Rowland Gaskell, a solicitor who is in love with Norah, approaches her revealing that Jim was a gambler; he was desperately in debt and had mortgaged Beach cottage, currently occupied by former sailor Bendigo, to Gaskell's father. Jim also left a mysterious packet in the care of Bendigo, to be given to Leonard, which Gaskell wants to retrieve. It will later emerge that these two plotlines, Leo's disappearance and Jim's packet, are closely connected: Leonard's kidnapping has been planned by Gaskell with the help of money-lender Eli Marks and of Philip, Norah's disgraced brother, to keep him away until Gaskell recovered the packet. Even more surprising are the reasons behind it, since Gaskell's criminal plan, which involved an abduction and caused considerable anxiety to the Wharton family, was actually motivated by altruistic intentions: he knew that in the letter, Jim confessed he had a part in the death of Norah's father (during a quarrel, the latter fell into the water; Jim could have saved him, but chose not to). Even though at the time nobody suspected murder, Jim wrote to his son, since he did not want him to marry the daughter of his victim. Gaskell, instead, wanted to destroy the letter to preclude Leonard and Norah from discovering the truth, which would inevitably ruin their lives. Leonard will eventually be found in the backroom of a London tavern, and Gaskell will burn Jim's letter, thus preventing the scandalous family secret from being discovered.[6]

The third mystery concerns the idol itself, and the two murders committed to obtain it. This is the most complex plotline, as almost all the characters seem to be chasing the idol, and hold it in turn; the idol's bewildering mobility thus becomes the means of spotlighting each character's role in the plot, or revealing their background stories. At the beginning of the novel, Leonard gives it to Norah as a present; then, in order to help her brother Philip, who needs money to emigrate to America, Norah sells it to General Burnley, a collector of curios. Soon after acquiring it, the General is found killed in his house, shot from the outside, and the idol disappears; it then passes from Jael, a woman engaged by Eli Marks to steal it, to Teddy, who bumps into her by chance and takes the idol to return it to the General on the next day. Upon discovering the General's death, Teddy hides it into the Whartons' Chinese jar, but Mrs Wharton sells the jar to Eli Marks, to whom she owes money. When Teddy goes to Marks to recover it, the jar is empty; the

[5] A similar item was featured in Hume's *The Chinese Jar* (1893), but the novel only exploited the exotic quality of the art-piece (so big to contain a person inside it), without further engaging with China or Chinese characters.

[6] The choice of leaving some of the characters in the dark concerning important facts that would affect them is similar to what happens in the *Hansom Cab*, where Mark Frettlby's written confession (his second marriage was void, as the first wife was still alive) is not disclosed after his death, in order to preserve the family's respectability.

idol has been stolen by a street-boy sometimes employed by Marks, Nebby, who has then gone to London.

Up to this point, the idol has been chased either for its possible role in freeing Leonard (as soon as Norah sold it to the General, a mysterious ad in the "Telegraph" appeared, promising to exchange Leonard for the golden god), or for its material value, but the characters ignore its origin and true meaning. These are uncovered when Teddy goes to London in pursuit of Nebby: on the train, he meets Jinfou, the Chinese man who was lurking after Leonard at the pier; this time, however, Jinfou appears as a refined gentleman, and reveals the story of the idol in a chapter aptly titled "A tale of the flowery land". The idol, named Wang-ho, is a Chinese god of ill luck, who must be constantly propitiated to avoid misfortune, and Jinfou is a priest in the god's temple in Canton.[7] Making Wang-ho a god of misfortune, Hume ironically exploited the common literary trope of the 'cursed' Eastern artifact with the power to cause calamities to its owners. While in many works of fiction the power of the artifact, at first disbelieved by Westerners, turned out to be true (a pattern exemplified, for instance, by B. M. Croker's story "The Little Brass God", 1905), Hume's novel makes it very clear that the 'ill luck' of the characters, especially the two murder victims, is of their own making, as I discuss below.

It is further revealed that there are actually twenty-four images of the god; fearing plunder during the war, the priests put them inside an iron box which they entrusted to one of them for safekeeping, but he went to London with the English instead, then fell sick. He thus placed inside one of the gods the key to the iron box containing the other ones, and a scroll with directions to where the box was hidden; then he wrote to Canton for help. Two priests, Jinfou and Yung-lo, were sent to London to recover the box; after a search that lasted ten years, they traced the idol containing the scroll to Leonard. Yung-lo just died, after converting to Christianity, but Jinfou still pursues the sacred statuettes.[8]

Teddy tells Jinfou that Neddy has the idol, and the Chinese priest finds the boy at the hospital (ironically, he has been run over by a Hansom cab); Neddy has already given the idol to Jael, but before that he had opened it and retrieved the key to the box and the scroll. Jinfou lets Jael hand over the idol to Eli Marks, who has been trying to obtain the whole golden set from the beginning, and then sets up a trap for him: together they go to retrieve the box in a Chinese house near the London docks. Marks insists in opening the box himself, without knowing that it is poisoned, and dies.[9] At the inquest, Jinfou is exonerated, as no evidence can be found against him: in fact, he had substituted the real golden idols with clay replicas, and the original scroll, which warned about the poison, with a false one. He can thus return to China and restore the idols to the temple, where he is now a high priest. Six months later, Leonard and Norah are married, Teddy and Fancy

[7] Hume's representation of the Chinese god of ill luck and its priest, relatively benevolent, contrasts with the far more disturbing depiction of the god of fortune and its cult featured in a novel published in the same year by Richard Marsh, *The Joss: A Reversion* (1901), where the devotees of a Chinese deity turn Englishman Benjamin Batters into a human version of their idol: they "cut me to pieces; boiled, burned, and baked me; skinned me alive. Then they dipped me in a paint-pot and made of me a god" (Marsh 2007, p. 217; see also Margree *et al*. 2018, pp. 9-10; 179-181).

[8] The plotline concerning the golden idol seems to expand some of the elements already present in one of the stories of the collection *Hagar of the Pawn Shop*: in "The Third Customer and the Jade Idol", Nathaniel Prime, a sailor, stole from a Canton temple an idol containing directions to a treasure, but dies in a dynamite explosion just after opening the box where the treasure was supposed to be. Hagar, who briefly held the idol in her shop, never learns what happened to him.

[9] Victorian crime fiction often foregrounded a connection between exotic poisons, crime, and moral disease (see Harris 2003, pp. 447-466).

are engaged, and Philip has gone to America to rebuild his life. A letter from Jinfou to Teddy unveils the mystery of the General's murder, still unsolved: the shooter was Jael, who meanwhile has returned to South Africa with her husband. Teddy only reveals it to Leonard, and then burns the letter.

3. The novel in context: sensational secrets and Chinese dangers

As shown by this lengthy (but still partial) summary, the story is quite convoluted, as typical of many of Hume's mysteries. He considered intricacy as a selling point, because it prevented readers from guessing the solution too soon, thus spoiling the fun.[10] Indeed, the plot is so tortuous that it might result confusing: red herrings are lavishly distributed, and the mutual accusations between the characters contribute to make it even more puzzling, especially since there is no single investigation, and no final reveal recapitulates all the main turning points. A contemporary review of the novel observed that readers of Hume may have sometimes hoped for less "carefully elaborated detective stories", but the same readers

> will hardly be prepared to welcome a detective tale conducted on the lack of system so noticeable in this one, where nearly all the characters do a little detecting 'on their own', confiding their secrets joyously to each other, and scattering clues about in the most reckless profusion. (*Literature – 'The Golden Wang-Ho'* 1901, p. 2)[11]

This apparent 'confusion' was a precise choice on the part of the author: in *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Hume had notably avoided the 'perfect' detective (Clarke 2014, pp. 43-71), and his later works are punctuated by ironic references to the fact that infallible sleuths can only be found in fiction.[12]

The lack of a single detective figure and the participatory nature of the investigation closely connect the novel to Sensation fiction, especially Wilkie Collins's; furthermore, focusing on the story itself, readers of mysteries then and now may also find the plot strangely familiar, as from beginning to end the novel wittingly evokes *The Moonstone*: it pivots on a sacred jewel from Asia, which is pursued by Westerners for its

[10] In the Preface to the revised edition of the *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Hume recounts how he had changed the first draft because the identity of the murderer seemed too obvious. Reflections on the difficulties inherent in writing crime fiction, never appreciated by critics, or self-ironic contrasts between higher literary ambitions and the need to meet the requests of the market, were often discussed in Hume's texts: in *When I Lived in Bohemia* (1892) one of the characters observes: "look at all the work, observation, logic, analysis, and memory involved in the writing of such a book; and yet when it is done and presents a perfect picture of a difficult criminal case, then critics dismiss it with the contemptuous remark 'that it is a shilling shocker!'" (p. 191).

[11] Most reviews described Hume's complicated plot as entertaining, even when stressing that it was just that: "Mr. Fergus Hume may not be a candidate for a niche in any Pantheon of the immortals; but undoubtedly his sensation tales of murder and mystery are among the most thoroughly readable things going" (*Books of the Week - Mystery and Murder*, in "Daily Express", 1901, p. 2). In a rather unfair comparison with Henry James, the "Morning Leader" observed that "There is no subtlety about Mr. Fergus Hume. His simple methods, obvious machinery, and inexpensive vocabulary are the antithesis of Mr. James's qualities; but the man in the street will certainly prefer 'The Golden Wangho' […] to 'The Sacred Fount'. And from his point of view he will be quite right" (*Pages in Waiting - An Idol Tale*, in "Morning Leader", 1901, p. 3).

[12] For instance, in *A Coin of Edward VII* (1903), the detective declares "I'm not omniscient […] it is only in novels that you get the perfect person who never makes a mistake" (pp. 70-71). In another China-themed novel, *The Mandarin's Fan* (1904), it is stated that "It is only in novels that the heaven-born detective (in the confidence of the author) displays wonderful cleverness in finding clues where none exist" (p. 152).

material worth, while mysterious characters from the East try to retrieve it for its religious value. The search for the exotic object provides the opportunity to uncover dangerous or shameful secrets, and the sacred item is eventually restored to its original seat at the end.[13] A closer reading also reveals more specific elements in common between the two novels: for instance, the experiment through which Ezra Jennings recreates the conditions of the diamond theft in *The Moonstone*, proving that Franklin Blake was responsible even without knowing it, is re-enacted in Hume's story, even quoting the same source: when Gaskell tries to obtain Jim's letter, it emerges that Bendigo misplaced it, and cannot find it again. Gaskell remembers reading a story about an Irish porter who made a mistake while drunk, and could remember it only when being drunk again; Gaskell thus gets Bendigo drunk on grog, then pretends to go away and spies on him, eventually retrieving the letter as soon as Bendigo falls asleep.[14]

Yet, in the case of *The Golden Wang-ho,* the choice to locate the sacred item's provenance in China, instead of India, provides the chance to engage, although in an oblique way, with current stereotypes about the Chinese. The representation of Jinfou is ambiguous at best, at times even contradictory, as it clearly exploits, but also subverts, some of the elements common to much popular literature of the time. Toward the end of the century, anxieties about the stability of British power in the Far East combined with the crisis of the Qing empire and the growing concern for Chinese emigration (Pan 1990), contributing to the popularity of stories in which Chinese characters played the part of fearsome antagonists: these included invasion fictions like M. P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger* (1898),[15] where a mastermind of crime from the East, who unites the advantages of a Western education with a propensity to despotism and violence, sets out to conquer the West.[16] Adventure novels too exploited the stereotype of the evil Chinese arch-villain: in William Carlton Dawe's *The Mandarin* (1899)*,* an apparently refined magistrate plays upon the gullibility of a missionary to abduct his daughter, while in *The Yellow Man* (1900) the head of a Chinese secret society pursues a murderous vendetta against an Englishman and his family. After 1900, the events connected with the Boxer rebellion originated a wave of novels that exploited the dramatic news from the Qing empire, as in George A. Henty's *With the Allies in Pekin. A Story of the Relief of the Legations* (1904).[17] As noted by Forman, in their "absolute polarization of good and evil" many of these fictions resembled Mutiny novels, even though the emphasis varied as to the reasons and responsibilities for the revolt (2013, p. 101).

These trends in popular literature gained wide currency at the turn of the century, alongside the more established fictional representations of Chinese characters as the inhabitants of the shady, and dangerous, London slums, often linked to the smuggling or consumption of opium. The opium den was featured in texts as different as Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Doyle's "The Man of the Twisted Lip" (1891), even though its literary ubiquity and bloodcurdling

[13] Collins's engagement with the East has spurred an extensive critical debate: see David 1995; Duncan 1994; Miller 1988, pp. 33-57; Reed 1973; Reitz 2004, pp. 55-63; Roy 1993; Rzepka 2005, pp. 101-110. Plot elements from *The Moonstone* were often exploited by late Victorian authors, including Arthur Conan Doyle and M. P. Shiel.

[14] On the medical sources for *The Moonstone*, see Nadel 1983, pp. 239-259.

[15] The complex publication history of Shiel's story, and its sequels, are discussed by Bulfin 2018, pp. 162-166.

[16] On 'Yellow Peril' fiction see Bulfin 2018, pp. 131-170; Forman 2013, pp. 130-160.

[17] In Henty's novel, the young protagonist contributes to defy the rebels also thanks to his knowledge of the Chinese language and his ability to disguise. Thus, the main character acts as a mediator between cultures, while still protecting British interests. See Forman 2013, pp. 113-115.

features did not reflect reality: Walter Besant was notably disappointed when he visited one, since "when one goes to an opium den for the first time one expects a creeping of the flesh at least", but the place was "neither dreadful nor horrible" (1901, p. 206).[18] Of course, there were also more positive, or nuanced, depictions of Chinese characters and culture: Limehouse literature, for instance, so called after the area of London were the Chinese community resided, at times emphasised the positive influence exerted by Chinamen on Eastenders, in the attempt to foster sympathy and counteract current prejudice (Chang 2010, pp. 135-137; Forman 2013, pp. 193-223). Yet, racialised depictions which emphasised the 'us versus them' opposition became increasingly prominent.[19] It is therefore worth looking more in detail at Hume's representation of Jinfou.

4. "Quite a Chinese dandy"

At the pier, when the Chinese man first appears, he is presented as a "wretched, shivering creature". Teddy mocks him with words that supposedly mimic Chinese ones, to which Jinfou listened "impassively" (p. 11); he then "glided like a snake into the line of Jayne's eyesight" (p. 12). His only eye "shot fire, and he flung forward; but suddenly checking himself, he smiled and cringed, and ended by darting through the turnstile and vanishing into the mist" (p. 12). This introduction clearly conveys the impression of a malevolent character with evil designs: his looks, his sinister smile, and his movements, compared to a snake's,[20] contribute to foreshadow danger, further emphasised by the fact that Leonard seems deeply disturbed by the mysterious figure. Once Leonard and his friends get home, the Chinese man is mentioned again as a possible – if exaggerated – threat, when Norah's mother wishes she could exploit cheap Chinese labour and Teddy mockingly suggests that she may hire the Chinaman they just saw at the pier as a housemaid. Fancy, quite alarmed, replies: "You'll do nothing of the sort. He'd cut all our throats" (p. 23).[21]

Such introduction leads readers to expect that Jinfou will become the main antagonist in the story, but his role is not so straightforward.[22] The image of the Chinese man changes dramatically when Jinfou and Teddy meet on the train to London. The encounter is confrontational at first, and quite resonant too, as "East and West faced one another

[18] As noted by Matthew Sweet, the pervasive presence of the opium den and the formulaic features through which it was described "by novelists, evangelists, journalists and activists, rarely let the facts impede the flow of Gothic extravagance" (2002, p. 91). Even in more recent discussions, "opium has dominated criticism about the London Chinese", partly reflecting Victorian exaggerations (Forman 2013, pp. 197-98). On literary opium dens as a late-Victorian fictional trope, see Chang 2010, pp. 125-140.

[19] Many of these elements converged in the *Fu Manchu* series by Sax Rohmer, which built upon stereotypes already circulating in the nineteenth century, catering on anxieties about Chinese retribution and framing them into a remarkably successful formula (Hevia 2003, pp. 316-326; Mayer 2013).

[20] Chinese characters were often compared to animals in the popular fiction of the time, especially when represented as moving in huge numbers, or as succumbing to uncontrollable rages. See Forman 2013, p. 109.

[21] Mrs Wharton often complains of her housemaid Martha and her propensity for breaking china. Martha is briefly substituted by Jael, who exploits her position to spy on the family on behalf of Eli Marks. Literary representations of women breaking valuable chinaware date back to the 18th century, as discussed by Porter 2010, pp. 139-146.

[22] A review in the "Daily News" noted that "At first we are naturally inclined to suspect the one-eyed Chinaman of villainous aspect […] but he turns out to be quite respectable in the end […] Mr. Fergus Hume is, perhaps, the best exponent of this form of fiction now alive. His mysteries succeed in mystifying until it suits him to clear them up". *Literature – Fiction*, 28 February 1901, p. 6.

defiantly": Jinfou takes out a "nasty looking knife", while Teddy prepares to shoot him with his Webley (p. 174) – a small revolver in use by the British forces. Hume often staged crucial encounters on trains: in this one, the characters meet on an express "swinging toward the capital at something like sixty miles an hour" (p. 174), a setting that contributes to heighten the pathos, further underlined by the narrator through the sentence "A most dramatic situation truly, and a terrible one!" (p. 174). Teddy and Jinfou look at one another without speaking, then Jinfou breaks the silence, and Teddy is surprised at his very good English. This is a first element that baffles expectations, since a very common trait of Chinese characters in contemporary fiction, either set in Britain or abroad, was the incapacity to pronounce English correctly.[23]

Another silence provides Teddy with the chance to observe the Chinese man more carefully, and a second element of surprise emerges: while at the pier Jinfou was dressed as a poor man, now he is "Quite a Chinese dandy", in European clothes, sporting a "serge suit, with patent leather boots, and a high linen collar and shirt. He wore a long light riding-coat, and did not disdain a pair of bright tan gloves" (p. 175). Furthermore, in a sentence that both evokes and counters racist stereotypes, it is remarked that "in spite of his yellow face and one eye there was something eminently refined about his appearance […]. The extremely sinister expression had vanished, and Jinfou was for the time a highly civilised first-class passenger" (p. 175). This description of Jinfou clearly shifts his status, placing the emphasis on his refinement, his understanding of English language and culture, and his wealth. These do not completely erase references to ethnicity, but complicate them, making him a more layered character than his presentation at the beginning of the novel may have suggested.

Then, Jinfou reminds Teddy of how he mocked him at the pier, and Teddy readily admits he behaved like a fool, thus marking that kind of behaviour as superficial and unjust. The two then proceed to establish their credentials, insisting on the fact that both are gentlemen and can therefore trust one another's words. To substantiate his claim, Jinfou throws his knife out of the carriage window, specifying that he does not expect Teddy to do the same. Teddy puts the pistol in his bag and they shake hands. A collaboration of sorts thus begins, as Jinfou guarantees that he did not shoot the General,[24] and promises to help Teddy find Leonard.

Teddy, "strange to say" (p. 179), believes him. This is a further element that draws attention to current stereotypes, as the Chinese were frequently berated for their duplicity and disregard for truth.[25] Well aware of this, Hume inserts a further comment that, again, both evokes and refutes assumptions concerning ethnicity:

> It was true Jinfou belonged to the most treacherous of nations – came from a country where the end is everything – the manner of its attainment nothing. Yet there was something about

[23] Invasion and adventure novels frequently emphasised the difficulties of Chinese characters with the English pronunciation, in a kind of inversion of the fluency in the Chinese language that marked many protagonists of boy fiction (Forman 2013, p. 144; see also Arata 1996, p. 124).

[24] Jinfou also remarks that "We Chinese use the knife, not the gun" (p. 178). The supposed Chinese distaste for – or lack of skill with – firearms was often mentioned in contemporary fiction, especially after the Boxer rebellion. This was not, however, ascribed to a general abhorrence of violence; in fact, the Chinese were often associated with a propensity to extreme cruelty, often accompanied by a remarkable indifference to physical pain. See Hayot 2009.

[25] The common prejudice concerning Chinese insincerity was often repeated, not just in popular fiction, but also in travelogues or in the numerous works aimed at 'explaining' the Chinese character to stay-at-home readers: see, for instance, Bird 1899, p. 194, or Rev. Cockburn 1896, p. 202.

> his manner and speech, now that he had thrown off his attitude of aggression, which impelled belief in his plain statement. (p. 179)

Jinfou is grateful for Teddy's trust, declaring "you are a brave English boy, and I am proud to be your friend" (p. 179). Then Teddy and Jinfou discuss the next steps to be taken. Throughout the rest of the story, Jinfou proves to be a true friend to Teddy: he is instrumental in finding Leonard and also helps revive him with a mysterious drink, thus putting another stereotype – that of Asians' proficiency in the use of potions – to good use.[26]

Thus, on the one hand, conventional representations are repeatedly invoked in relation to the Chinese character, including references to his cunning, inscrutability, proneness to rage, stealthy movements, and the network of spies through which he keeps track of the other characters' actions. On the other hand, while he is certainly clever, and he is responsible for the murder of the money-lender, he is never presented as an evil mastermind; his only aim is to return the sacred idols to their proper seat. Unlike the god of fortune featured in Marsh's *The Joss*, the deity does not seem to require gruesome rites or human sacrifices. Moreover, Jinfou readily collaborates with Teddy, helps in the rescue of Leonard, and reveals the identity of the General's murderer at the end. He is thus both criminal and 'detective' at the same time.[27] However, it is important to stress that, even though he cooperates with Teddy and his friendship seems sincere,[28] he does not become a mere helper of the Englishman, as was often the case with Chinese characters depicted as good, or at least reliable, but still acting in a subordinate position.[29] Jinfou remains independent and, most importantly, he is the only one who displays a knowledge of both cultures, which clearly gives him an advantage over the other characters.

In fact, much is made of Jinfou's social status, and Hume goes to some lengths to show that he is not just affluent, but also cultured. This contrasts with many coeval narratives that ignored the Chinese highly stratified class-system and conflated high-ranking officials and poor sailors under a common identity based solely on ethnicity (Forman 2013, p. 200). Jinfou's connection with the shady establishments near the London docks is functional to his plan to recover the golden idols, but it is made very clear that he does not belong there, as testified to by the detailed description of his sumptuously-furnished house in Bloomsbury, filled with expensive objects that not only show his wealth, but also his refinement and taste.

Thus, his character confounds expectations: the references to negative stereotypes are used to keep up the suspense, yet he never turns into a completely evil antagonist, as if Hume did not want to fully endorse the prejudices about the Chinese increasingly widespread at the time.[30] This is confirmed by the poignant way in which Jinfou's

[26] Another potion returns in chapter 22, this time taken by Jinfou himself to calm his rage at Philip, who contributed to the kidnapping of Leonard. Again, popular assumptions about "Oriental nature" are evoked, as Jinfou "stamped and raged and paced the room like a wild beast. His face was distorted and he became wholly an animal" (p. 253). But then he pours some drops from a phial into water and drinks it: "Within ten minutes he was quite himself again, and apologising humbly for his behaviour" (p. 254).

[27] Different instances of fictional characters who combined detecting abilities and moral flaws, or even criminal activities, are discussed by Clarke 2014.

[28] At the end, Jinfou sends gifts to the English characters, inviting Teddy to visit him in China; Teddy, however, will not accept the invitation, as "Mr Jinfou, delightful as he can make himself, is a friend whom I certainly prefer to have at a distance" (p. 307).

[29] This is the case, among others, of Ah Lo, Rex's devoted servant in Henty's *With the Allies to Pekin*, or the less honourable, but still faithful character of Ting-Foo in Dawe's *The Mandarin*.

[30] In *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Sal briefly describes a Chinese man with whom she had a relationship, stressing that "Chinermen ain't bad; they treat a pore gal a dashed sight better nor a white cove does. They

reception at the Wharton's house is described: Norah is very glad to meet him, as he has been instrumental in freeing her fiancé, and her sister Fancy finds him "quaint and amusing" (p. 279). Only Mrs Wharton

> declined to see any good in the visitor. A Chinaman, to her thinking, could be nothing but an animal, and a vastly inferior one at that. So she treated Jinfou as she might have treated a Coolie, and he, in return, was exquisitely polite. Nobody was sorry when Mrs Wharton retired to bed very early, as was often her habit; and for the rest of the evening Jinfou enjoyed himself, being quite charming to everybody. (p. 279)

Mrs Wharton has been established from the very beginning as a self-pitying, fun-spoiling, and bigoted character, whose negative outlook on life contrasts sharply with the positive attitude of her two daughters. The description of her reaction to the Chinese priest, which is not functional to the plot, clearly condemns her views as narrow, and her behaviour as rude.

5. Ineffective Britons

The representation of Jinfou suggests a complex engagement with issues concerning British relations to 'the Other', which is further corroborated by the ineffectiveness of the two English characters which should be expected to play a pivotal role in the investigations, but fail to do so. In fact, Teddy is introduced from the very beginning as clever and judicious. Even though he is orphaned and without a guardian, he is able to manage his consistent patrimony very wisely. His attachment to Fancy, and his willingness to help her sister Norah in finding Leonard even at his own risk, are further proof of his good character and bravery. It is true, both Teddy himself and the other characters repeatedly insist on his youth (quite inconsistently, since he is twenty), but this should not prevent him from playing the detective role successfully: young detectives were quite common in fiction (Andrew 2017), and adventure novels often featured protagonists that, notwithstanding their young age, managed risky situations and achieved results. Yet, although truly committed, and possessing all the moral and intellectual qualities to succeed, Teddy's investigations are not really decisive.

An even more resonant lack of detecting abilities characterises Leonard who, at the beginning of the novel, seems perfectly positioned to become the hero of the story. He is a Lieutenant, has military training, and plenty of experience abroad. Yet, he is kidnapped at the very beginning and disappears until chapter sixteen; even after being rescued, he does not engage in any kind of investigation. Most importantly, in his years abroad he has learned nothing that could be useful to himself or his friends in their present difficulties. While fictional detectives, or the heroes of adventure stories, were increasingly presented as capable of solving mysteries and dealing with complex situations thanks to their knowledge, this is not Leonard's case. This is quite evident from the account he gives Norah of the two years he spent in China:

don't beat the life out of 'em with their fists, nor drag 'em about the floor by the 'air.'" (2012, p. 221). Chinese men were often described as better husbands than English ones also in East End fiction as, for instance, in Thomas Burke's 1916 *Limehouse Nights*. Burke's influential collection and its resonance in the context of coeval perceptions of Chinese immigrant are discussed by Witchard 2009; see also Fiske (2017) https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articl es=shanyn-fiske-modeling-masculinity-engendering-the-yellow-peril-in-fu-manchu-and-thomas-burkes-limehouse-nights.

> "Oh, the usual business of Jack afloat!", replied Leonard. "One's kept pretty busy one way and another in that part o' the world". Then he told her something of the capture of coolie pirates; of the chasing of junks harbouring suspicious characters; of the baffling of Chinese treachery; and of the thwarting of doubtful Russian diplomacy. And he did his best to give her some idea of what a cyclone was like; passing from that to the description of the Spice Islands. One or two adventures which would have explained some ugly cuts on his arms and body he carefully suppressed. (p. 20)

As a true gentleman, Leonard hides the episodes connected with his injuries, which might hurt his fiancée's sensibility, but this account is just a list of seemingly pointless 'adventures' unconnected with each other, and does neither convey an awareness of a wider purpose, nor any understanding of China, its inhabitants, or its culture.

Another character who, notwithstanding his military training and engagement with the imperial project, is presented as ineffective, is General Burnley: he is an old, lonely bachelor whose driving passion is the collection of curios. Hume is careful to stress that the title of General does not correspond to a remarkable military expertise: in fact, he was "something of a miser and very little of a soldier. He had gained his rank in the old days when war was less of a fine art than it now is, and although he had fought bravely in several campaigns, he was by no means brilliant" (p. 76). In particular, the General seems oblivious to the fact that his collection, which contains very valuable items, is placed in an unprotected room, and is thus at the mercy of burglars; this is insisted upon, both by his friends and, later on, by Norah herself, but the General remains unconcerned, "being perfectly confident of his ability to beat back any attack that might be made upon his precious curiosities" (pp. 76-77). The golden idol will eventually be stolen, and the General himself will be murdered for it, proving that his confidence was decidedly misplaced.

Furthermore, while his greed for curios is repeatedly stressed, it is not matched by a comparable expertise about the objects he loves so much. When Norah offers him the idol, he eyes it with "greedy pleasure", calling it "a fine example of Chinese work" (p. 77), and he surmises that it may come from the Summer Palace. The repeated references to the looting of 1860 are indeed resonant, even more so in the light of the more recent looting they must have evoked to contemporary readers, that of Beijing after the Boxer rebellion.[31] Yet, the General does not try to ascertain the idol's provenance, and he cannot read the characters inscribed on it. He just places it on a shelf "in company with some Chinese ware, a ship of carved ivory, and a gaily painted porcelain pagoda", observing with satisfaction that "It's like home to him. It is" (p. 78). Again, his naivete proves wrong, as the driving element in the plot is Jinfou's attempt to restore the idol to its true 'home' in China. Through Nora's eyes while she surveys the collection we learn that the room

> resembled nothing so much as a curiosity shop. It was literally packed with quaint and valuable furniture, silken curtains from Japan, pictures by masters old and new, porcelain, china, books, old silver, carvings, and such like. General Burnley's taste did not seem to lie in any one especial direction. All was grist to his mill, from snuff-boxes to steel fenders. (p. 79)[32]

[31] The looting of the Summer Palace and its reverberations in Britain are examined by Hevia 2003, pp. 74-118. The sheer amount of objects stolen, and their elusive nature, were frequently emphasised by the press. See, for instance, Milne 1858, pp. 370-72. On the looting of Beijing that followed the Boxer rebellion, see Preston 2000, pp. 285-291.

[32] The collection of curios returns frequently in Hume's fiction, but with different functions: in *Hagar of the Pawn Shop*, the objects populating the shop provide the starting point of adventure, re-enchanting the dreary monotony of everyday life.

Crucially, "From the terrible disorder which prevailed", she concludes that "the old man's mind must be in a very confused state" (p. 79). The General's ownership of curios does not reflect a mastering of objects.

The way in which the idol becomes – temporarily, at least – part of a collection of curios evokes the increasing focus on objects in crime, romance or adventure fiction of the turn of the century, where art pieces, heirlooms, technological marvels, or powerful artefacts of foreign origin came to the fore, reflecting the enthusiasm and the concerns triggered by commodity culture and mass production. In crime fiction, the solution to the mystery was often linked to the capacity of the detective to properly 'read' material objects, but here not even the collector, who should at least know something of the objects he collects, really understands what the idol is; even more poignantly, he does not really care, and is not able to protect it.[33] Hume stresses instead the General's greed, and it is not by chance that the only two characters who are killed during the narrative (the General and Eli Marks), are both marked, albeit in different ways, by their acquisitiveness.

A more significant, although dubious, engagement overseas distinguishes Rowland Gaskell, who, in terms of cleverness and ambiguity, might compete with Jinfou; his depiction is distinctly multi-layered, and thus deserves to be looked into. The character of Gaskell, in fact, is often opposed in the novel to that of the Chinese priest: while the latter is said to come from a country where "the end is everything – the manner of its attainment nothing" (p. 179), the chapter titled "The end justifies the means" is wholly devoted to Gaskell's plot to cover the family secret. Another element they have in common, although in reverse, is the use of potions: Gaskell gave Leonard drugged brandy to make him sleep and abduct him, and he made Bendigo drunk in order to recover Jim's packet. On both occasions, he used the beverages to take advantage of other characters. Jinfou instead used a potion to restore Leonard's health, though temporarily, and drank one himself to calm his rage. Moreover, the restorative he offered Leonard appears in the same chapter as the latter's account of how Gaskell had tricked him with drugged liquor, so that the contrast between Jinfou's well-meaning intent and Gaskell's dishonest one becomes even more evident.

Even Gaskell's religious faith is depicted in terms that are far from admiring: he is described as a bigot, and his decision to go to Africa as a missionary is announced only after he understands that he has no chances with Norah, as a kind of second-best option. When his sudden departure becomes known in the village, it is clear that he will not be missed: "no one expressed great astonishment. The lawyer had always been thought to be more or less of a fanatic", and his choice was "only in keeping with the many other queer things he had done" (p. 232). All are happy – and curious – about Leo's return (described in the same chapter), but nobody cares for Gaskell, and those who know about his role in the Lieutenant's disappearance are very angry with him: Mrs Wharton calls him a "reptile" and a "wicked serpent" (pp. 233-234), using words that are all the more resonant since he has gone abroad to spread Christianity. Teddy remarks that "he'll make a giddy missionary", and Fancy replies: "I hope he'll be eaten […] though any cannibal of taste would refuse him" (p. 234).

Yet, even though Gaskell's criminal plan involved hiding an uncomfortable truth and led him to collaborate with the greedy Eli Marks, it was meant to preserve Leonard and Norah's chances to be happy. Finally, the last chapter reveals another puzzling turning

[33] As observed by Nicholas Daly, the detective could be seen as an adventurous version of the collector, as both embody the power of domesticating material items by providing for them a stable, univocal reading (1999, p. 101; see also Freedgood 2010, p. 151).

point in Gaskell's strange career: he has not gone to Africa, as everyone thought, but to China (Jinfou met him as he was leaving for the interior).[34] The other characters imagine that he will be killed for sure, as the Chinese "think nothing of human life – more especially of a missionary's" (p. 303), but nobody is too saddened at the prospect, as nobody really mourned Eli Marks. Their final remarks on Gaskell aptly stress the contradictory nature of his character: Leonard observes that "there's one thing I never can get over, and that's Gaskell's behaviour. It seems so perfectly inconsistent – at once so bad and so good! It's a puzzle to me", to which Teddy replies "yes, and a puzzle it will remain, Leonard. No amount of guessing will solve it" (p. 307).

Thus, Hume chose, as in many of his novels, to conflate elements of detection, sensation and adventure. The crime fiction of the turn of the century was indeed more porous than usually assumed, and this pattern allowed for a more multi-faceted treatment of justice, crime, and truth.[35] Most importantly, as there is no focus on a single crime investigation, there is not clear moral polarisation: no character in the story is either a hero or a thorough villain. The lack of a single, effective detective figure further emphasises this nuanced representation.

6. Britannia's empire

In the late nineteenth century, China was regarded by many as a tottering empire, ready to be 'carved up' – a precarious situation further confirmed by the defeat of the Qing empire in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). At the same time, rivalries between western powers increased, and the 'scramble for China' became even more intense: competition for concessions (including railway constructions, mining privileges, and loans to the Qing state) escalated, and some even hoped that this would eventually lead to a partition of the country. The Boxer rebellion, and the volatile political conditions that ensued, added new uncertainties to an already complicated scenario.

This occurred while public opinion in Britain was increasingly divided on the issue of empire: some were deeply concerned by the possible loss of power and prestige abroad, and clamoured for stronger interventions; others were instead disturbed by the belligerence of new imperialism, and vocally questioned further engagements overseas, which involved a huge (and increasingly less sustainable) expense of manpower and resources.

Even though Hume's novel was meant to provide a light, entertaining reading experience, it does engage with issues concerning British commitment overseas and the confrontation of East and West. Most obviously, Hume resists the easy opposition between British hero/es overcoming an oriental foe, which often supported a view of the imperial project as crucial or necessary, or confirmed the idea of the British fitness to rule either through knowledge or sympathy (Reitz 2004).

[34] In chapter seven, in order to find out something on the mysterious idol, Gaskell goes to the library to read about "the religion of China" (p. 90): this suggests that he lacks any background knowledge about the country, so that his decision to go there is even more surprising. The Christianisation of China was a prominent issue at the time, strongly engaging – and dividing – public opinion; for some, it was a praiseworthy enterprise in itself and a crucial aid to the modernisation of the Qing empire; others instead regarded the growing presence of missionaries as imperilling already brittle diplomatic relations; the fact that the number of Chinese converts remained low further fostered controversy, even among missionaries themselves (Girardot 2002, pp. 208-211).

[35] As noted by Humpherys, the focus on a single crime and a single investigation tends to limit "the potential for reading any large social significance into the solution of the mystery" (1991, pp. 455-72; see also Reitz 2004, p. 57).

The novel's concern for imperial issues becomes even more evident if we consider some of the narrator's comments, especially relevant because they are few (the novel is mostly dialogue). The two villages where the protagonists reside, Fletmouth and Oldport, are deeply engaged with the naval power of Britain, but this involvement is not described in triumphant terms:

> People who could not afford to live at Fletmouth eked out an existence at Oldport, where rents were low and victuals correspondingly cheap. They were mostly retired navy folks with large families and small pensions, who cast their sons overseas to carry on the work of the previous generation, and kept the girls at home in genteel poverty. Consequently Oldport was an Adamless Eden, and numberless Eves chased the Service men in Fletmouth, content to 'keep their hands in' between whiles with certain despised civilians. Whenever there was a marriage, fleet and army knew the happy pair and all about them, even to the scanty amount of their income and the whereabouts of the station to which they would probably be exiled. When Britannia scrimmaged on the ragged fringe of her empire, Oldport bought war-maps, and a large supply of little flags on pins, and generally studies geography at the expense of relatives, wounded or slain. When the enemy were drumpled up, the town rejoiced, and welcomed the returning V.C.s and D.S.O.s with cheap teas and Cinderella dances. Everybody knew everybody; and the conversation included mention of every spot coloured red on the map. In a word, Oldport was one amongst many nurseries of embryo Nelsons and undiscovered Wellingtons. (pp. 26-27)

Even though potential Nelsons and Wellingtons are evoked at the end, the general atmosphere conveyed by this description is despondent, as the passage clearly foregrounds that common people do not gain much from British power abroad, notwithstanding their sacrifice.

The association between empire and death returns when Norah arranges a meeting with Nebby at "the Pillar",

> a monument to the local heroic dead of Oldport, which was set up in a piece of waste land half-way between the two places. A simple column of white marble rose on a granite base, and on this latter were chiselled the names of those Oldport heroes who had died gloriously for their country. It had been erected by general subscription, and no names were excluded. Officer and private, naval man and military had a place on that roll of honour; and there was ample room for the future generations of heroes. (pp. 67-68)

Again, while duly paying tribute to the fallen, the last sentence of this passage makes it rather ambiguous: British men who perish abroad will be memorialised as heroes, but the "ample room" for future casualties foregrounds the costs, while there is no mention of the advantages to be gained by overseas power, or of any moral reason that may justify it. This becomes even more significant if we consider the readership at which the stories were aimed: as noted by Clarke, Hume was not considered a 'sophisticated' author, as testified to by the snobbish reviews he received in high-brow magazines, and by the enthusiastic ones he earned in low-brow ones (2020, p. 86).[36] Thus, this treatment of the imperial theme would be especially resonant for a lower-middle-class readership, who could identity with the inhabitants of Oldport and their dutiful, albeit not rewarding, patriotism.

[36] Some recurring elements in Hume's fiction were especially appealing to a working-class public, like the sensational elements that often involved the unveiling of the upper classes' dishonesty (Clarke 2014, p. 47).

7. Conclusions

As scholars increasingly recognise, late-Victorian crime fiction was remarkably heterogeneous, incorporating as it did elements of romance, sensation, and adventure, baffling attempts at a clear-cut definition, especially if one moves beyond a small cluster of 'canonical' texts. In particular, the idea that crime fiction does not warrant detailed critical analysis, since its conventions matter more than textual individuality (that is, the features of a text usually coincide with the formula) has been progressively amended (Gulddal *et al*. 2019, pp. 9-13). This is especially true for texts like Hume's – 'shilling shockers', as the author himself defined his books – that participated in more than one genre.

A discussed above, Hume's *Golden Wang-ho* intriguingly engaged with issues perceived as crucial at the time, notably in the context of debates about British power abroad. Unlike many contemporary narratives, including crime stories, the empire does neither become a stage for showing the virtues that enabled Britons to rule (Mackenzie 1984, pp. 204-205), nor becomes a source of attempts at reverse colonisation (Arata 1996, pp. 107-111); in fact, Jinfou is not interested in 'conquering' anything apart from what originally belonged to his temple. Moreover, while the titular idol adds to the growing number of potentially disruptive exotic artefacts that populated contemporary fiction, its Chinese origin, and the way in which the story develops, provided Hume with the opportunity to exploit, while also challenging, current assumptions, especially by contrasting the ineffectiveness of the British characters with the skill, knowledge, and efficacy of the Chinese monk.[37] The comments on the debates concerning Chinese immigration, and the passages providing ambiguous images of what the empire truly entailed for many British citizens, further contribute to stress troubling contradictions, without providing facile answers.

Thus, while the far-fetched nature of the adventure certainly made for light reading, also thanks to the ironies that punctuate the narration and the relative lack of truly scary or upsetting elements,[38] the text is not without wider significance; it resonates with the tensions that characterised debates on the empire at the time, a feature further reinforced by the lack of an effective detective figure and the ambiguous representation of the main characters. *The Golden Wang-ho* represents an interesting instance of the fluidity that characterised turn-of-the-century crime fiction, which also allowed – as in this case – for a compelling combination of playfulness and timely relevance.

Bionote: Silvia Granata teaches English literature at the University of Pavia (Italy). She has published articles and book-chapters on detective fiction, representations of animals in British literature and culture, ecocriticism, and the relationship between literature and science in the 18th and 19th centuries; her latest monograph is *The Victorian Aquarium. Literary Discussions on Nature, Culture, and Science* (Manchester University Press, 2021). She is currently working on the Victorian encounter with China.

Author's address: silvia.granata@unipv.it

[37] For reasons of space, this analysis has been limited to *The Golden Wang-ho*, but it would be interesting to compare it with other novels featuring Chinese characters and themes that Hume published in short succession, like *The Jade Eye* (1903) and *The Mandarin's Fan* (1904).

[38] As noted in an Advertisement for the novel, Fergus Hume was known as a writer of "wholesome fiction […] There are no long descriptions of scenery, and no dreary analyses of character. The whole story, from first to last, is alive with incident, and abounds in dramatic situations". The Advertisement was repeatedly published on various newspapers; see, for instance, *Brilliant Story of Absorbing Interest*, in "Midland Mail", Saturday 29 December 1900, p. 3.

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